

CITY OF NEWARK, NJ'S AFRICAN-AMERICAN ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interview with Owen Wilkerson, August 12, 1997

Q: This is Glenn Marie Brickus. I am here at my residence with Mr. Owen Wilkerson. Today is Tuesday, August 12, 1997. Mr. Wilkerson, I just want to say hi and thank you for coming and becoming a part of our oral history project to the Krueger-Scott Mansion Cultural Center in Newark. And I will begin by asking you to please give me your full name, your date of birth, and your place of birth.

Wilkerson: Okay. Thank you very much, Mrs. Brickus, for having me here and I too concur with you that it's a much needed endeavor. It portrays the magnanimous history of African-American people in the City of Newark. And I wholeheartedly support this undertaking and I would like to commend the Newark City Council, specifically council member Donald Tucker for taking the reins in getting this positive venture off the ground. My name is Owen Thomas Wilkerson. I was born March 22, 1943 in Halifax County, Virginia.

Q: And what is your current occupation, Mr. Wilkerson?

Wilkerson: Currently as we speak, I am a legislative analyst with the office of the City Clerk. And the office of the City Clerk's main responsibility is setting policy and assisting the Newark Municipal Council in setting legislative policy and other matters relating to the governance of the City of Newark.

Q: What were your primary occupations before you began this job?

Wilkerson: Well, let me go back. My first paying occupation, you might, paying occupation you might say was in 1965 upon graduation from college I became a reporter for the New Jersey Afro-American newspaper. And from there I went, I was also with the Newark Board of Education in the Bureau of Attendance as an attendance councilor. When I was growing up, we referred to

them as truant officers. But I was an attendance councilor. And after an enjoyable career with the Newark Board of Education as well as the New Jersey Afro-American newspaper, I went on to work with the Newark Evening News as a reporter. In 1971, the Newark News went on strike and subsequently folded, and I became editor, executive editor, of Encore Worldwide News Magazine in New York City. That was founded by poetess Nickey Giovanni and journalist Ida Lewis. I spent two and a half years with Encore and then moved on with the Boy Scouts of America working out of their national office in North Brunswick, New Jersey, where I was national news executive. In my role as national news executive, I had a staff of six people, and we were involved in all sorts of community and public relations, as well as specific activities for the Boy Scouts of America on a national level. After my departure from the Boy Scouts of America, I went on to work as a public relations manager for the Sperry & Hutchinson Company. S&H Green stamp division in New York City. And that again was a fantastic career. I learned a lot from the aspects of dealing with corporate America and it was just a, you know, at one time I said to myself, gee whizz I'm moving too fast.

After the Sperry & Hutchinson Company, I had the proud distinction of serving as an aide to former assemblyman Eugene Thompson, who represented Newark in the Assembly. And in that endeavor I was an aide working on public policy analysis in the areas of education. I think he sat on the Assembly Education Committee. And I know he was an ardent supporter of environmental education and environmental studies. You know, in the Assembly. And I worked with him in these areas also. He was also extremely, he was an advocate of tenant-owner rights in public housing. And numerous occasions we would go to Washington, D.C. where we met with then U.S. Secretary of Housing Jack Kemp, and we would discuss matters relating to urban public housing and tenant rights issues, what not.

I joined the Newark Municipal Council, the office of the City Clerk, in August of 1989. And I've been since employed there to this date.

Q: Whom did you marry and when did you meet her and where did you meet her?

Wilkerson: Interesting thing about it is really interesting. Going back in retrospect. In 1966 I got

a call one day from Ebony Magazine. And the interesting thing about it is the editor that called me was a relative of a friend of mine during my old college days and what not and everything. At first I thought it was a gag because when she mentioned his name, you know, I thought really that it was him putting some individual up to a prank and everything. But to make a long story short. I appeared in 1966, I appeared in 1966 the Ebony's eligible bachelor's list. And I think back at that time they had a list of so-called prominent, young African-American men who were moving up the corporate ladder and doing well in their respective professions and what not. And at that particular time, I was with the Afro-American newspaper as well to the Board of Education. And the same month that the picture appeared, that is when I met my son's mother, Cheryl Pelzer. And we were united by one of the BFJ's, B.F. Johnson's sons, Charlie Johnson, at a sorority affair in New York City. And I met her, and we started courting and what not and everything, and we were married in 69. And she's from New York City. She attended Livingstone College in Salisbury, North Carolina. And she is now an administrator with Essex County College, City of Newark.

Q: How long did you know Cheryl before you and she were married?

Wilkerson: Oh, four years.

Q: And what kind of work did she do before she became an administrator at Essex County?

Wilkerson: She was. I know she was with the New Jersey College of Medicine and Dentistry in its early formative stages with a program called Project Child. That was a prenatal educational program. I remember they had a big van and what not because they were interviewed on TV, but they would go about in the community I would say advocating to young African-Americans and hispanic females about the, not necessarily the pitfalls of having a child, but the protection methods and what not as far as having children at an early age. It was more or less a prenatal education program, and they did not counseling work and what not and everything, and they worked closely with the school system. That I could remember. At that particular time I was, you know, caught up in journalism and other things and what not and everything and doing a lot of traveling so we

would see one another at fleeting moments and what not.

Q: Do you have, you and she have children?

Wilkerson: Yes. We have one son, Jason, who is sixteen years old. Jason Thomas Wilkerson.

Q: Where was Jason born?

Wilkerson: In New York City. Harlem Hospital. 1970.

Q: What is your father's name?

Wilkerson: Did I say 1970. Hold on. 1980. I'm sorry. 1980. November.

Q: Okay. Okay. What's your father's name and where was he born?

Wilkerson: My father was born in Rocksboro, North Carolina. A little hamlet right out of Rocksboro, within Rocksboro, called Woodsdale, North Carolina. And Rocksboro is located in Person County, North Carolina. His name was Ernest Baxter Wilkerson, and I knew him for a very short length of time. He left my mother and I when I was three years old, but there was such an extended family environment. His brothers and his sisters and mother and all remained in contact with me and my mother and we're still in contact with one another today. He subsequently moved to Slydell, Louisiana and raised a family and what not. One of my half sisters is a judge in Austin, Texas. And he died recently in March, and I sent his family flowers and a condolence and everything. And I get to New Orleans once in a while, you know, if not lecturing at Tulane or Dillard University, and Slydell is right up the road across Lake Ponchatrain. And I really want to, the next time I'm in New Orleans really want to get with my half sister and just sit and talk and what not and everything. I had previously had, you know, animosity toward him and everything because, you know, he just abandoned my mother and I and everything, but my entire childhood

she never talked bad about him or she never, you know, belittled him in any respect, you know what I mean, you know. And even when I would criticize him, she would always come to his defense and tell me to look introspectively within myself and be the man that she wanted me to be and to rise above criticizing my father.

Q: What was your mother's name and where was she born?

Wilkerson: My mother's name was Lucille Francis Owens. She was Owens. And this is how I got my first name. Owen. We just dropped the S off the name. But she was born in Virgilina, Virginia which is a small hamlet of Halifax County, Virginia.

Q: Did you have any brothers and sisters?

Wilkerson: No. I'm the only child.

Q: What was your father's occupation?

Wilkerson: At the particular time, my father looking at, you know, from my birth certificate, his occupation was a farmer.

Q: And your mother?

Wilkerson: Her occupation was farmer.

Q: Have you ever at any time changed your name in reference to perhaps membership in a religious organization or political organization that kind of thing?

Wilkerson: No. No. My name is still the same. Owen Thomas Wilkerson.

Q: How old were you when you came to Newark?

Wilkerson: We came, I came to Newark, I was four years old. We had stopped off in Baltimore, and we were torn between Baltimore and New Orleans. At that particular time my father had promised, that particular time meaning when I was about one or two or three, my father had promised my mother that, you know, at that particular time he was in the New Orleans area and he would send for us and what not and everything. As a matter of fact, and she wanted to be a nurse, and she was to have enrolled in the Flint Goodrich Hospital Nursing School. At that particular time, you know, New Orleans was a segregated city, and Flint Goodrich was the hospital where the patients were, you know, of African-American. And he never did send for us so New Orleans was knocked out of the box, and we were living in Baltimore, and I had an aunt, my mother's baby sister, was already up here working. She later worked for Mayor Ellingstein, City of Newark. And she was doing domestic work in Livingston and what not so she, you know, wrote or sent for us in Baltimore and, you know, opened the doors where we could move to the City of Newark and everything. And plus I had a great aunt who was already here by the name of Mrs. Carrie Jenkins, and she was very active in the community. She was a member of the Jehovah Witnesses Church and what not, and if I, I'll never forget her cause she reminded me, she was, golly, she was about six, two, and everytime I see Mary McLord Bethune I see her because. And I didn't know who Mary McLord Bethune was when I was five or six years old, but now I see the pictures of Mary McLord Bethune and I could see my great aunt, a strong resemblance. But anyway, we moved in with her and what not and all, and she was such a dominant force in her community. She lived on Barclay Street, and she knew everyone and what not. Knew Mrs. Scott who at that particular time was head of the Scott School of Beauty, where my mother subsequently went and graduated and she later became a beautician.

Q: How long, do you remember how long you stayed in Baltimore before coming to Newark?

Wilkerson: Oh God, it was, I would say it was about six or seven months.

Q: How did you, do you remember how you traveled leaving the south, coming to Baltimore?

Wilkerson: Yeah. We, I can't remember, but my mother later told me we came by Trailways. At that particular time the Trailways Bus. Greyhound was too expensive, and there were rumors that Greyhound didn't cater to black Americans, African-Americans, and but Trailways that was quote, unquote the black bus. I mean everyone, whenever we went south, we would always take the Trailways.

Q: At three years old you would not remember what the travel conditions were like in terms of, well, you talk about the segregation so that's a foregone conclusion.

Wilkerson: Yeah. Yeah. I later knew about the segregation in the south when I was about six or seven years old cause I remember we used to go back down to Halifax County, Virginia and North Carolina to visit during the summers. And I remember that was before, I remember when we got to the end of the Turnpike, we had to take the ferry across the Delaware into Delaware because the Delaware Memorial Bridge was not built then. But I remember distinctly after we got past Washington, the bus driver would politely state that, you know, due to the segregated laws of the south and what not, you know, that any black person that sat in the front had to move to the back. I do remember that. And I remember we all, our first stop, this was our second stop because our first stop was in Elkton, Maryland, and it was a restaurant we would stop in, and we couldn't go in. We, meaning the black patrons and what not. And, you know, several, I remember several kind, you know, white people, I guess they were also embarrassed and everything, you know, would ask us what we wanted and what not and everything. We meaning, not necessarily my mother and I, but other people and everything, and we would give them money and they would go in in the white section and buy our food. The second stop was in Burke, Virginia, where we could get out the bus and we could go in the back and get served in a colored section.

Q: So the driver of the bus was a white man.

Wilkerson: On yes. There were no black drivers for Trailways.

Q: What was the neighborhood like where you first settled in Newark?

Wilkerson: Okay. I first settled on Barclay Street. And it was on the corner of Barclay and Rose. And it was a very interesting neighborhood because, while you had, while it was predominantly African-American neighborhood, at the other end of the street of Barclay and Avon, you had a big house and that particular big house was full of white people I remember and Filipino people. I had never seen someone from the Philippines, but I remember I used to play with the Filipino kids and what not and everything. And it was a very stable community. There was a black doctor who lived at the bottom of Avon Avenue, I mean, not Avon Avenue but Rose Street. And you had two nurses that lived in the area. And it was a very stable area. I, my mother worked, she had gotten a job at Consolidated Laundries in Clifton Street, which is right around the corner from Sears Roebuck, and there was this lady that took care of me named Mrs. Burrow on the corner of Rose Street and Avon Place. And Mrs. Burrow, she was like the guardian mother. She took care of about maybe six or seven kids while their parents, their respective parents worked during the day. Myself, along with Stevie Phillips, Sofonia Phillips, and Sofonia had an older sister named Sylvia Phillips. Then there was some other kids that she took care of. But the interesting thing about it is that we all loved in the district of Charlton Street School, and we all went to Charlton. And you had the Dawsons, Clyde Dawson and his brother Carl Dawson, who is now Carl Sharif. They lived on Avon Place. You also had the Campbells, Dotie, Bernice and Gene Campbell. Matter of fact, Gene Campbell who later became superintendent of the Newark Public School System. There's a scar right here on my forehead that Gene Campbell caused when I was about maybe six or seven years old. We were playing street ball, and I was a little too close to Gene swinging the bat, and Gene accidentally hit me right here and broke the upper part of my nose and what not.

But we had great times then. Carl Dawson and Stevenie Phillips, you know, they after Charlton, they went on to Central where Carl was an exceptionally talented football player. Stevie was an all city pitcher and musician. And, you know, Stevie is now living in Paris now. He plays with Rhoda Scott Jazz Ensemble. Stevie was over here a couple years ago. I didn't get a chance

to see him, but next year in 1998 we want to get over to Paris for about a week or two, and I want to look Stevie up. Cause I still keep in contact with, you know, Carl Sharif and those, and Carl has Stevie's address and what not.

Q: Right. The neighborhood when you first settled on Barclay Street was it a mixed neighborhood, like was it residential or were there shops and businesses located there?

Wilkerson: Well, yeah, there were one family homes. I don't know who the owners were. But it was a pretty stable community area. I later moved up the hill to Hillside Place. Up the hill was only about three or four blocks, and we were all still within the school district of Charlton Street School. But that was an interesting neighborhood. You had Dr. E. M. McCarol, Dr. McCarol, very gorgeous, beautiful lady. She was a pediatrician. And at that particular time, and around the corner on Belmont, you had Dr. Philip Geer. And those were the only two black doctors that I knew of, you know, but they all lived within the community. You had the Roundtrees on that street, you had the Carters, you had the Moores. And Hillside Place was only two blocks, and that was considered the quote, unquote, the better part of Hillside Place because with the, not that we looked down upon the other folks in the other block of Hillside Place, but you had your professionals in the block that I lived in.

I remember you had a Jewish couple living right across the street from me, and they had a son named Seymour and he was a motorcycle patrol for the Newark Police Department. Mr. Carter lived next door. He and his wife. I can't remember her name. But Mr. Carter was a very interesting individual. He had, he was from one of the islands, I can't remember what Caribbean island and everything, but he would always sit down and talk to us about Marcus Garvey, and he would always talk, you know, discuss politics with us and what not and everything. And I remember for some reason I got a penchant of reading the newspapers then. I would always read the newspapers. I didn't know anything about the Newark Evening News or the Star Ledger because everybody on the block read the Daily News and the Afro. And Mr. Carter would always sit down and talk with us. It was just a great block. In that block we had Ronnie who was a pimp. Ronnie had a string of women and what not and everything. And Ronnie started a baseball team

up for us.

Q: Do you remember what Ronnie's last name was?

Wilkerson: No. I don't. He was a short guy. He was always a smooth dresser. And he started a team called the Asiatics. And we didn't know what the, I didn't know what the word Asiatic was. So he would say, hey, Asiatic, we're going to name this team after the sea, the Asiatic Sea. So, you know, we were the Asiatics. He went out and bought blue baseball caps for us and everything, and had an A and everything on it. And he was the type of a guy that, you know, if a family needed some money or something like that, he would give you two or three or four dollars and everything so you could go around the corner to Fischer's Bakery and get day old bread and what not. But Ronnie was, you know, Ronnie had diamonds and jewelry and everything, but he would always tell us I don't want you to be like me. And he saw us goofing off out there, he would come over and grab us, and, you know, smack us around occasionally, you know, telling us that we shouldn't do this or shouldn't do that and everything. But everybody looked out for one another.

If Mrs. Moore saw me goofing off and everything, she would wait, or Mrs. Roundtree saw me goofing off, she would wait until my mother got home from work and she would tell my mother, and, you know, I would get a beating. You know, and I laugh, you know, I laugh at that today when I see this baseball player Carl Everett who plays for the Mets, he and his wife are being accused of child abuse. And I said to myself, if Bacchus was around back then, the way we used to get whippings, you know what I mean, all our parents would be in jail and we would all be in foster homes. Because, I'll never forget, I'll never forget my mother lit into me one day. And it wasn't so much what had happened was I think, and I never did ask her, but I said, I made a remark to her when she was around some of the ladies at the church, they were visiting. And my mother was the type of a person that if I goofed off, she wouldn't retaliate immediately. You know, she would probably wait a day or two. You know, when I'm not thinking about it, and she'd say, well, hey remember when sister Brickus was over here that remark that you gave. And, you know, that could have been about two or three days earlier. You know, I'm saying, yeah, yeah,

okay. She says well, you know, go in the bathroom, take your pants off. You know, and so.

Q: She had to wait until she cooled off.

Wilkerson: Yeah. So, you know, but everybody looked out for another. You know, if you were low in lard or butter or something of this nature, I mean, you could go down the street and get some butter and everything from the Roundtrees, or the Moores or the Carters or the Adams family or what not. You know, and expect someone to come to you, you know, looking for maybe a half pound of sugar or something like that. And everyone subsisted. You know.

Q: Do you think, Mr. Wilkerson, that the kind of discipline and the kind of interaction among community people, the adults who were concerned with raising children, do you think that that produced a better, more substantial, more committed adult than what we're getting now with DYFUS's impact?

END SIDE ONE, TAPE ONE; BEGIN SIDE TWO, TAPE ONE

Q: Mr. Wilkerson, I believe we were talking about the discipline of young children as they grew up and the impact that the kind of discipline that parents did then as opposed to the discipline that they are permitted, should I say, to do now. Do you think it might have produced a better quality, a more committed adult then than now?

Wilkerson: Well, you know, you look at DYFUS and what not, you know what I mean. And you have these strict laws these days that if you look at the baseball player at the Mets, Carl Everett, he and his wife are being taken through the judiciary system as far as allegedly assaulting their kids. Well, you know, back when I was growing up, and I mean no one knew about DYFUS. I mean, if you did something bad, you were beaten, you know, and if DYFUS existed back then, all of our parents would have been under scrutiny of DYFUS, and we'd probably all be in foster homes now and everything. I think that the discipline that I received I'm thankful for it today. I mean,

naturally, you can't, you know, when you're like twelve or thirteen or eight or nine, you can't understand. I never forget. My mother used to always tell me. I remember she beat me one day good, and I ran under the bed. And she had the broom trying to get under the bed, and I grabbed the broom and everything. I mean, it was fun to me. So she wouldn't let me come from under the bed. She sat there for about two hours. I had to go to the bathroom. Now in the eyes of DYFUS that would have probably been child abuse. But I remember she would always tell me, and at that particular time, there was this black policeman named Slim. He was a black Newark policeman. And Slim naturally we were kids, we didn't fear him, but we would always see him beat up on older black men, you know, pulling them out of the bars and what not and everything. And my mother used to always beat me and say, and she would tell me, I still love you but it's better for me to beat you than that white policeman downtown. And the irony of it is that I'll never forget is that my son and I we were coming from the baseball game in New York. This was back when he was about eight or nine. And these two policemen in Penn Station were talking with this young black man and all of a sudden he broke away from them. And they beat him unmercifully with their night sticks in Penn Station on a Saturday afternoon, or Saturday evening, maybe about six or seven o'clock. And my son saw this. Now the average person would say, gee whiz, I wouldn't want my son to see this. But I wanted my son to see this. I wanted him to see this. You know, this is what happens. This is what will happen. Whether the gentleman was right or wrong. I don't know what was said, I don't know why they had stopped him or not, but it was a good lesson for my son to see. And we still talk about that incident when I feel that I have to lecture him and what not. You know, like he'll be with his friends and what not, and you know, and walking or what not and all, you know, I always tell him to be extremely careful when he goes to the suburban malls and what not. If a policeman barks a command or you obey and you leave. But discipline, it helped, it helped.

Today, I think we have so many laws and everything. You have the psychologists are saying well gee whiz if you continue to beat the kids, they just become rebellious. But, you know, I'm from the old school. If a kid needs a spanking, you know, and I'm just talking, you know, a spanking meaning, you know, you get a strap and you beat the kid on the butt. That's not to say you start punching on the kid or smacking the kid in the face and everything and what not. You

know, we were never, we were never abused in that respect. In the classroom, I remember, we had a teacher in school used to pull our ears. That was child abuse. Cause used to ring our ears and pull our ears and what not and everything. And, you know, my mother never pulled my ear. She would always get the strap and have me pull my pants down and she would beat me.

Q: I think we had better discipline in the classroom and consequently better education during those days when we were disciplined by parents than we do now.

Wilkerson: Right. Right. I remember in the classroom, and this, you know, this happens, you know, when we had a substitute teacher, it was field day because the regular teacher wasn't. I'll never forget this young lady named Cynthia Cornelia, and Cynthia Cornelia, I don't know what she's doing now or what not, but she was a very smart, bright young lady, very beautiful and everything. But Cynthia used to jump up on the tables and dance and what not and all, and that particular time, Harry Belafonte's Deo, this could be about 52 or 53, was just coming out. And she would always sing Deo, you know, when the substitute teacher was there. And I'll never forget this one, you know, this was the Charlton Street School and this one teacher, substitute teacher, her name was Miss Armstrong, and we used to call her Miss Strongarm because, I mean, she was big. You know what I mean. And other substitute teachers we would take advantage of, but when we found out that we had Miss Armstrong, we were like lambs. You know, because Miss Armstrong had a reputation, I mean, she would grab you and literally throw you in a corner. You know. But the discipline paid off. I mean, it was great.

Q: That's right. During the 70s, I worked in both capacities, first as a substitute teacher and then as a secondary English teacher in the Newark School System.

Wilkerson: So you know that when you're the sub, when you walked in there the first day and said, hey, you had people reading, radios, you know, feet up on the table cause you're not the regular teacher.

Q: They used to say to me, and one young man at Westside High School, came over and sat by my desk one day and asked me are you coming back here in September. And I said, I don't know whether I am or not. He said, if you do, we're gonna run you away from here. I said, you want a bet. [Laughter]

Wilkerson: Well, you know, that was, you know, I mean, we took advantage of the substitute teachers. You know. It was a field day. You know, I mean, you'd go to the bathroom, you stay a half an hour. I mean, you know, it was. But there was still, there was still some self-esteem there and still some respect there. We had, when I was in grammar school, we had predominantly African-American teachers. The one most fond teacher that I can remember her name was Miss McClain. Her name was Eva Chambers and she married and she became Miss McClain. And again talking about the neighborhood context, Miss McClain lived right across the street from Charlton Street School.

Q: We're gonna get into an education category later so let's kind of save that until the end. But one thing that I had meant to ask you about the two neighborhoods you remember when you first came, what was the housing like?

Wilkerson: Okay. Barclay Street was mainly I wouldn't want to use the word transient or. I mean no one knew whether you rented or what. I mean, you know, you just lived there. You know what I mean? I mean, I'm sure people were renting. On Hillside Place there was a lot of home ownership. The Roundtrees owned their home, Dr. McCarroll owned her house, the Carters owned their house. We rented from Miss Washington. We lived right on the corner of Avon and Hillside Place. And her husband, I mean, her son was a boxer at that particular time. And, you know, I would, you would see him, you know, when he was in town, but he mainly fought overseas and boxed and everything. But when he would come home, he would, you know, be driving a big Cadillac and smoking a big cigar, and he would give Mrs. Washington, his mother, money and what not and everything and what not. But we rented from her. There were very few rooming houses in our block as opposed to the other block of Hillside Place where you had

Charlton Street School. They were mainly rental type houses. On our block you had, you know, you had trees and what not. We had this pimp Ronnie, he would always, every summer, he would always have us whitewash the curbs of the, whitewash the curbs or the sidewalks. You know what I mean? We'd be out there whitewashing. And he used to always say you gotta make your neighborhood clean, you gotta get your neighborhood clean and all. And he would always impress upon us that we should grow trees and flowers and what not and everything. Well, that was good for the girls and everything, but I mean, you know, those were sissy things to us. You know, the guys. You know what I mean. You know, we want to go down to Ripple Field and play ball and what not and all, and explore other parts of the city.

I'll never forget we all used to go to Pyrene. Pyrene was a factory over there near Watson Avenue that made fire extinguishers. Pyrene Fire Extinguisher Factory. And we never knew what was beyond that area. Well, lo and behold, one day we all rode our bikes up Chancellor Avenue. And Mrs. Brickus we were scared because we were in a whole nother world. I mean, we saw big stately houses. And we thought, we knew Hillside was over there, and we thought maybe we were in Hillside. You know, we were all afraid. You know what I mean? Oh if our parents find out that we're out of Newark, and then we were worrying about the Hillside Police. But we were in Newark. We were along Chancellor Avenue which at that particular time was predominantly a Jewish neighborhood. And I'll never forget riding by Weequake High School, and there was a ball park there, a field, called Unteman Field where we stopped and we saw all those little white kids in uniforms, organized Little League games. And here we are, we just had our little blue caps and tacky tee shirts and what not and everything. And, you know, it never dawned upon me that one day I would be running track in that same particular field. It never dawned on me that I would be attending that high school. You know. But that was an eye opener because at that particular time we didn't know poverty because there was a support system. You know, my mother used to always tell me, you know, she would say, you know, sometimes I feel like going on the state, but I'm too proud for that. At that particular time, the state was referred to as welfare. You know, and I'll never forget that we got an application for the public housing. I can't remember what housing complex it was, but we got an application to move there, and my mother said, no, we're not moving there. Because we are not poor as we see it. She said, this is what the white man

wants to believe and tell us that we're poor. And she said, no, we're not moving to public housing. And at that particular time, you know, those houses were pretty and everything. Brick, nice houses and everything. But we remained on Hillside Place. And but we didn't, you know, no one knew poverty. And it was really, it was really, you were really looked down upon and somewhat ostracized if your peers knew that you were on the state. Because when you were on the state, you know, naturally you would have a white person to come by once in a while and check on you and everything. And then, you know, for some reason all the clothing looked alike. You know, the glasses looked alike. So, you know, you could say, oh yeah, he's on the state. So you say, how do you know he's on the state. Cause look at those glasses. They had a certain pair of glasses that everybody wore that got the glasses. You know what I mean.

But, you know, from that experience of going over in Weequake, Weequake area, and the thing about it the kids were, we would go back over there and we would intermingle, you know, with the, you know, the Jewish kids and what not. And, you know, they, I imagine some would keep their distance. They would say hello, how are you. You know, but it was another world that I had, living right here in the City of Newark, I had never witnessed because we would always remain in our enclave in the Central Ward. I mean, we would go downtown and we would see white people and what not, you know, but our community was so close knit that you didn't necessarily didn't have to go downtown. Because you had the National Theater on Belmont Avenue. You had the Essex Theater on Springfield Avenue. All along Springfield Avenue and Prince Street, we did our shopping. Rigley's Bakery I remember. You wanted some paint you'd go to Joseph Riccardi on Spruce Street. You stopped by the milk bar. You know what I mean? You'd get a big sundae for. So the only time we really, we really ventured out is for entertainment.

You know, going downtown to the movies. And shopping at Bamberger's and everything. Bypassing Hanes because when I was growing up, black people couldn't go into Hanes. And my mother at that time had joined the Irving I. Turner Association cause Irving I. Turner was the first African-American councilman in the City of Newark. And they used to picket Hanes. But we never got that far down, you know, Broad Street. We would always stay within the Broad and Market area and what not.

Q: You have kind of touched on my next question. Where did you do your shopping? In general, where did people buy food and clothing and household needs, whatever they had?

Wilkerson: I bought, my parents, by her working at Consolidated Laundries right around the corner from Sears Roebuck, I would buy all my clothes at Sears.

Q: That was the big Sears store on Elizabeth Avenue?

Wilkerson: That's right.

Q: Yeah. Okay.

Wilkerson: And right next door was the A&P. And every Wednesday she got paid. And I would, she would always tell me to meet her at the A&P. Well, I wanted to meet her at the A&P because at that particular time I loved the smell and I still love the smell of Eight O'Clock Coffee. And that was the A&P's coffee. And I used to go in there, and you know, you could just literally pick the coffee beans off the floor and what not and all. And I used to pick them up and put them in my pocket, and when I get home, I would just smell the coffee beans and what not and all. But that's where we did our shopping.

All my Easter suits came from London Boys and Girls Shop on Springfield Avenue, right below H&L Green Five and Ten Cents Store. A lot of my clothes, my mother after her Consolidated Laundry job from Monday to Fridays, sometimes she would work part time in service. She would take the Summit bus, the 70 Summit, you know, and go to Summit, and she would, you know, clean white people's homes and what not. And there was this one particular family that used to give her, their son Jimmie, I think, was oh about six or seven years older. And this lady would give me, give my mother Jimmie's clothes to give me and what not. You could really tell they were very expensive clothes.

The shopping was all along Prince Street in one supermarket out of another one. I'm talking about markets. When I say markets, I'm talking about open markets. Not like an A&P or

Acme. You had markets where you could get, you know, a live chicken in a cage. The guy would cut the chicken's neck off, and like a farmer's market. Lettuce, beats, you name it. It was a vibrant community all along Spruce Street, Prince Street, all the way over to Montgomery where you had the bath house, all around that area. You had Krueger --

Q: Krueger Brewery.

Wilkerson: Krueger Brewery. Fantastic. So we did all our shopping there, and, you know, when we would go downtown, it was either to, you know, you'd either go to a movie. The adults would either go to Wideaway Ballroom or the Terrace Ballroom and what not and everything. And then you had, you had, the interesting thing about it, you had a lot of vibrant life, night life in that area, along West Street. We would venture over to West Street because, you know, we would shine shoes and what not. And we would hang out in this particular bar on Montgomery Street and shine shoes and you'd see the, you know, the slicksters going in there with their ladies and what not and everything, with their madams and all. And the slicksters bought all their clothes, it was a store called Wolmuth, W O L M U T H. Wolmuth was up near the old court house, and it could be in the vicinity where that Burger King is now located. But that's where all the slicksters, you know, bought their clothes. You know, the gangsters. You know what I mean? Sharkskin suits and what not and everything. But, you know, a suit at Wolmuth's back then was a hundred and fifty dollars. I mean, whereas a suit that my mother would buy at London Boys and Girls Shop was maybe fifty dollars. And she would pay weekly, you know, she would put five dollars a week down on a suit and everything.

I had a friend who used to buy all of his clothes at Brown & King. Brown & King was on Market Street across from Bamberberg's and Ohrbach's I think. And Brown & King was another upscale store that, you know, we would buy our clothes from. But, Brown & King had a, shall I say, an eccentric air. I mean, when you walked in there the salesman would look down on you, and what not and everything. They didn't know how to sell like the salesmen at London Boys and Girls Shop. They were all Jews. And, you know, I don't want to be derogatory or flammatory, but, you know, a Jewish merchant could sell you anything because when you walked in his or her

store, you were made to be somebody. They would come over and hug you and shake your hand, and, you know, they got you. You know. They weren't standoffish.

Q: Were most of the merchants in the area where you shopped, whether it was for food or clothing or other shopping that was necessary, what was their ethnicity?

Wilkerson: Jewish.

Q: Did they hire any blacks in their establishments?

Wilkerson: Oh yes. They hired, you know, African-American people. I don't know whether they were in managerial positions or support type positions. You know, but there was a black presence even if it was a salesperson behind the counter. Salesperson, the black salesperson may not necessarily have operated the cash register, you know what I mean, but there was a presence there.

Q: In those days, we were not yet aware of our quote, unquote disadvantage economically and as far as class was concerned. So there was no resentment on the part of the black folk toward those ethnic, other ethnic merchants that served them or made their money off the black community. We didn't resent that at that time.

Wilkerson: Well, I don't know whether there was any resentment, but we were aware of it. I remember you had a proud Moorish American community. I used to go a barbershop called Friendly Barbershop on Prince Street. And Sabu was a barber there. Elderly man. And he wore a red fezz with the. You know, and I didn't know what he was, you know what I mean, until, you know, I later found out. He would cut my hair, and he would start talking to me about black economics and what not. You know. We gotta do for ourselves. We gotta start owning this and owning that. And the interesting thing about it is back in those days, and I still hold this to this day. If you really, really want to know the pulse beat of black America, go to a barbershop on a Saturday morning, and, hey, you could hear all sorts of tales and you could really get an education.

So I used to go there, you know, seven, eight or nine, you know what I mean, and I used to just listen to those guys. You know, the old timers. And they use^d to talk about, you know, owning this. Whereas they owned acres of land in Georgia. And, you know, it was, yeah, there was some, we knew what it, we knew that it could be done as far as, and I'll use the word African-American economic empowerment. At that particular time, you know, being a kid, I didn't know what we called it. But, yeah, I was privy to that. Used to be this numbers man named Jessie. He used to write numbers and he used to pay us through the neighborhood. And this is what I'm saying the mixture of, you know. And Jessie was, Jessie could remember you put 445 in both races, Jessie could keep all those numbers in his head. And if Jessie were alive today, and I'm sure back then Jessie could have gotten a job in a bank as a vice president because the man was mathematical, he knew numbers and everything, and the interesting thing about it, he didn't have any number slips on him. Because naturally he feared that if had some debt slips on him the cops. He kept everything up here. And whereas, you know, so you sit back and you look upon a guy as Jessie the number writer, and you say, well gee whiz, is he bad morally or is he good. And the ironic thing about it is my mother and her friends and everyone on the block, they never belittled Jessie. They admired him because he was self-employed, and, you know, hey, you know, my mother would put in five cents. I mean, everybody played the numbers. You know what I mean.

Q: So did I.

Wilkerson: You know, everybody played the numbers. You know what I mean. So, you know, Jessie wasn't looked like because number one, it wasn't like, it wasn't like he approached you and said you have to play. You know what I mean? If you didn't want to play, fine. You know what I mean? And you were never addicted to it. If you didn't have any money this week, Jessie would say, well look, what you want to play, you pay for next week. If you win, I'll get five percent cut. But you had all types. And Jessie used to always, Jessie would always talk about. I'll never forget he would always say, he would see us, you know, every time we would turn around, you know, we would be having sodas and everything, and he would come by and he would see us with our bikes and everything. And he would say, how much did you guys spend today? And, you know,

which I tell my son the same thing today. You know, Jessie said, you know what, he says, you really don't need a soda, you know, three and four and five sodas a day. He said, one soda a day. He said take that money and put it in a piggy bank. You know, we used to look at him like he was crazy because we were kids. You know what I mean. But, yeah, there was, to make a long story short. There was, I personally was introduced to some aspects of economic empowerment at an early age. I mean, my uncle used to always tell me, hey, you know, when you got a present, some money and everything save your money. And then plus, Mrs. Brickus, within the school system, we had a bank that was affiliated with the school system that opened up a savings plan for students. It was Howard Savings Bank. So we would have our little brown bank books and everything. You know what I mean. And every Wednesday, I think, was bank day. Whereas, you know, the monitor would come around and you'd put in fifty cents and what not and everything. And they had the people from the bank downstairs, and they would stamp your little bank book, and at the end of the day. Yeah, there was, what I'm saying, yeah I was privy to that.

Q: Well, Mr. Wilkerson, aside from the conversation in the barbershops on Saturday morning where adult African-American men would talk about the economic, perhaps, disadvantage of black folk in comparison to the advantages of white folks. Was that resentment shown in any other way by any other members of the African-American community?

Wilkerson: The resentment of blacks owning their own businesses?

Q: The resentment toward whites who owned businesses in the black community.

Wilkerson: No. The only, you had the NAACP then, and I remember the closest resentment was that, the closest resentment was not hiring enough black people. You know, they would picket the stores and everything. I remember H&L Green was picketed. Oh God, I don't know how old I was, but my great aunt who I referred to earlier, Carrie Jenkins, she was a Jehovah Witness, and I used to hate to go out and stand on the corners with her, selling the Watchtower. And I mean you just stand there all day. You know, and I see some of these sisters going downtown, I'm saying,

hey, I know what you're all going through.

END SIDE TWO, TAPE ONE; BEGIN SIDE ONE, TAPE TWO

Q: We were talking about the attitudes of African-Americans towards white merchants who owned stores in their neighborhood. And I believe I had asked you if there was resentment towards those merchants and how it might have been shown. You talked about the awareness of economic, the importance of economic empowerment by black folk, and it was mostly manifested by conversations in the barbershops on Saturday morning. And I was wondering was that kind of resentment or that kind of interest or was there any determination to change the status quo as far as black economic empowerment was concerned.

Wilkerson: There wasn't any resentment per se, but everyone was aware of it. You had, I remember and I guess we're an emotional type of people and what not and everything, but occasionally you would find a merchant's store picketed if that particular merchant didn't hire a black person or what not or the black person was accused of stealing something out of the store and then it couldn't be substantiated. You know, the merchant's word against the person's word and what not and everything. But you had some, you had semblances of black empowerment then. I mean, there were, there was Miss Stuart's now that I remember, Miss Stuart's restaurant was on Prince Street. I guess you would say that she was a black entrepreneur. Everybody went to Miss Stuart's. On, I think it was West Kinney Street you had Arizona Inn, I think that's the name of a restaurant.

Q: Yeah. It's up on Bergen Street now.

Wilkerson: Right. Right. You had the people who ran Arizona Inn. My aunt owned a beauty parlor, my father's brother. You might say that she was a type of an entrepreneur and what not because she hired people right out of Scott's School of Beauty to work for her. She owned Renee's Beauty Salon. And, you know, she would give, as a matter of fact, she even let some of

the women who had failed the state test, you know, work there and what not and everything. Under the table stuff and everything. But there was awareness and everything. You had the Roundtrees, Moses, Malacai, all of them. Old man Roundtree owned all sorts of rooming houses and everything, plus he owned the barbershop on Charlton Street, and they owned a restaurant also. Yeah, you had some people who were entrepreneurs and everything, but there, if I can recollect and I may be wrong, but there was no business that could compete with Rigley's Bakery. And I say business, I mean an established business.

Now I'm sure some of the sisters lived in the communities and all. I know Mrs. Roundtree and several other women, Mrs. Simmons and all of them, they used to have cookouts and bakeouts. I'm talking, I'm telling you some of the cakes and pies that they used to make would rival Rigley's, but Rigley's was an established business. Rigley's had his clientele, Rigley's had trucks to, you know. So what I'm saying is that there are other ways of making money legitimately and enhancing your economic power within the community. Selling things and what not. Selling cookies and foods, you know. You know, a dollar fifty, you know, macaroni and cheese sandwiches and what not and everything.

Q: Did the local white merchants in the neighborhood offer credit to the residents in the community?

Wilkerson: Oh yeah. Yeah.,

Q: Do you suppose that the fact that they were perhaps rather liberal with their credit was that an influence on the blacks shopping at those stores, or was it because there was no place else to shop?

Wilkerson: Well, I think, you know, going back earlier, you know, the majority of these merchants were Jewish. You know, whether they were Russian Jews, German Jews or Jews from Austria, you know, I don't know, but I remember the majority of them were Jewish. And I think that they just had a good business sense. And the bottom line was that they realized that they were in a particular community, and for them to remain economically, whether they wanted to give credit or

not, they had to give the credit. And, yes, when my mother would buy me a suit at London Boys and Girls Shop over on Springfield Avenue which was owned by Jews, she would put three dollars down on the suit, and they gladly accepted the three dollars. Because she couldn't put a whopping sixty or seventy dollars in one lump sum on a suit because her paycheck from Consolidated Laundry amounted to something like forty-two dollars a week. That's, you know, that's excluding whether she did any domestic work up in Summit or Livingston on the weekends. So I think, I would say from my perspective, from what I saw and from what I witnessed, yes, there, you know, and I guess it's human nature, if you have a store and you come and you get me a good deal or something of this nature, or I may see a shirt, and I tell you, well, Mrs. Brickus, I don't have any money but if you can just hold that shirt for tomorrow when I get paid. And I go back there and buy the shirt the next day, I think that I would have, I would have a sense of --

Q: Commitment.

Wilkerson: --commitment to you. Yeah. I would think extremely highly of you, knowing that you could have left the shirt out there and it could have been gone in maybe an hour. You know what I mean. So I think that there was that commitment to the local Jewish merchants or white merchants. And I would probably add on that we didn't have credit cards. I mean, we didn't know anything about paying those, whether Mastercard or American Express existed. Now downtown, they had their own credit cards. I remember Brown & King had its own credit card. I imagine Bamberger's had its own credit card. I imagine Ohrbach's had its own credit card. But when we went downtown to stores like Bamberger's and Ohrbach's and Kresge's, it was like a one shot thing. Christmas. You know what I mean? And you wouldn't go back down there until a special occasion like Mother's Day or something like that. But we didn't, my mother didn't know anything about credit cards or what not. And I would be, I would even be surprised if she could get credit. You know, because the job she had.

Q: Did you have a sense of whether or not most of the people who lived around you in the communities where you lived had their roots in the south?

Wilkerson: Yes. Everybody was from somewhere else. You know. And the interesting thing about it is whenever a kid from the south would come up to the school, you know, we would always laugh at him because of the twang and what not. You know, not realizing that our parents were from the south. You know, even if we were, even if we were born here in Newark, and everybody was born in City Hospital. I mean, if you were black, you weren't born in Beth Israel or Clara Mass, you were born in City Hospital if not born at home. But, yeah, everyone was from the south. A lot of my friends were born in Newark, but getting beyond that facade, I mean if you really want to truthfully look at it, you know, they couldn't deny their southern roots.

Back then you had, you had different clubs. A lot of people probably don't know this. But you had the Alabama Club, everybody from Alabama, you know, and they have their little club and it was just for Alabamans. If you're from Georgia, you go to the Georgia Club. You know what I mean? And they would give little socials and dances and all where they have a band coming in and what not and all, and cookouts and, you know, people go down and watch the old Newark Bears and what not and all.

Q: I can remember when we had state rallies at the church.

Wilkerson: Yeah. Yeah. The clubs. Yeah. Alabama. Zion Hill. I grew up in Zion Hill Baptist Church, and they would have different, when Reverend Pullen was there before Stanford came there. And they had, you know, those clubs from different states and everybody. The majority of the people that I remember, and you look at the divide, the geographical divide during World War II. Everybody east of the Mississippi came up this way. And on the fringe of the Mississippi and west of the Mississippi, everybody went to LA or straight up the Mississippi to Chicago. I mean that's, you know. Cause I've since, even when in college I went to a predominantly black college. You know, you get into your room, you know, you sit and talk to your roommates. You know you have a beer in the dorm and everything, you know, you start talking like we're talking now. Hey, where did your parents come from. You know, where are you from man. You know, a guy says yeah, well, man, I'm from Texas and all my people went out toward LA because that's where they had the aircraft companies and everything. You know what I mean. You know, this one guy

said, well, I'm Chicago man, but my parents came from Mississippi. And you could just pinpoint. You look at the map and you say everybody from Mississippi went straight up the river to Chicago, St. Louis and what not.

And I don't see that today, but I saw that then.

Q: Do you think that, what should I say, the intermingling of those two cultures, those persons who came to Newark from the south and persons who had been in Newark for a much longer period of time or persons who might have been born in Newark, did you see a difference in the development of a common lifestyle?

Wilkerson: Well, within the, and this is again from my perspective, from what I saw coming up. You had, I saw two things. Sure, you know, when a kid came from the south and everything, we looked upon the kid, you know, as being country and what not and everything. You know, we would laugh at his or her twang and what not. But under the one roof, we're all black. We're all black. And somewhere along the line, if you were born in Newark, your great grandfather was from the same state that that kid is from. So you couldn't knock it, you know. Or your parents was from that state. And sometimes, you know, I'm sure the parents would ostracize the kids and say, well, okay, well, gee whiz, well maybe you were born here. You know what I mean? So does that mean if this kid's from Alabama and you're ostracizing him, and I was born in Douthin, Alabama, does that mean I'm in the same boat. So, you know, you just pulled back. You know what I mean? You kept that among yourselves and everything. You know what I mean? But in the eyes of, you know, in the eyes of the status quo today, white America, you know, they look upon all of us in one lump sum.

Q: As far as I said lifestyle, you know, in the south we ate certain kinds of food, and in the north the people were a bit more, I don't know if you call it cosmopolitan or what.

Wilkerson: Caviar.

Q: Okay. [Laughter] No caviar.

Wilkerson: I had my first, I'm fifty-four years old now, I had my first taste of caviar when I was forty-three.

Q: I don't like caviar.

Wilkerson: Me neither.

Q: But, you see, I grew up in the south. I grew up in the state of Louisiana.

Wilkerson: What part?

Q: I was born at Linden, Louisiana. Little hamlet outside a city called Sidney, Louisiana, but I didn't.

Wilkerson: That's northern.

Q: Yeah.

Wilkerson: Okay. Huey Long country.

Q: Yes. Yes. Yes. And I grew up basically without my father, and my mother, you know, did what she could. But I grew up eating the kind of stuff that was available to black folk in the south. But then when I became old enough to go out and be on my own, I used to work as a governess. I was hired as a governess for the governor of the State of Louisiana. And, of course, I learned --

Wilkerson: About other delicacies.

Q: About other delicacies that most African-American people still don't eat. Like asparagus and broccoli and cauliflower and artichokes and all of that good stuff. We don't eat that kind of stuff as a rule.

Wilkerson: I grew up on okra, fried corn. My mother used to fry corn. I invited a friend, this was back in the sixties, I invited a friend over one day. I had to stop by there something, to pick up something, and she was cooking some fried corn, and he had never heard of it. And he's from Douthin, Alabama. He says, fried corn. Wow, I have never had fried corn. I don't know whether it's a regional thing or not. But I think that we all brought our recipes with us. Because when we got here, we could go to the market and get the same thing. And, again, within our community, the Jewish merchants were astute enough from a business point of view to know just what we wanted. You know, I don't know whether they had antennae out there or what, but I don't know whether they did a survey to say, well, hey, let's take a survey and see how many people like collard greens or red beans and rice or chicken and what not. But I had the basics of eating fat back, ribs, you know, regular delicacies. I mean, you know, you mention artichokes and what not. I really didn't get into that until I was, quote, unquote, more sophisticated enough and everything. But I mean, I ate the basic samples. Cornbread, beans, rice, spaghetti. Every once in a while we'd have some spaghetti. Spaghetti as a kid to me was a delicacy. Because spaghetti was expensive. You know why? Because it was in a can. And my mother always used to say, hey, you're paying for that can. So let's get some broccoli which was not in a can which was cheaper. So spaghetti and meatballs was a delicacy. We would have spaghetti and meatballs every Thursday night and fish every Friday. But I think that, and this is just what I can experience, my mother and other people who lived within, on Hillside Place and everything, we all ate the same thing. You know, basic things. I mean, you would have, I mean, you have people like the Roundtrees who were economically sound and even Dr. McCarroll. Now maybe Dr. McCarroll would sample some caviar and what not and all because, I mean, she was in a higher economic bracket that she could. I mean, Dr. McCarroll, I remember when I was like nine or eight, Dr. McCarroll went to Paris. You know, we said, Paris, where's that. [Laughter] And, you know, she came back and she told us about pictures of, she was telling us about them. And she could speak a little French. You

know, and this was a new, you know, we had never heard of Paris. But she could, she was the type of person that could get into the, order chops or caviar and anything, but from what I can remember, she ate the simple food that we ate.

Q: See people like Dr. McCarroll, in addition to having the.

Wilkerson: You knew her.

Q: I knew of her. I never patronized her, but, yes, she was still in practice for a few years after I had come to Newark. But people such as she and others had both the experience of associating with people in, you know, categories that we were not accustomed to, and she also had the benefit of her education --

Wilkerson: True.

Q: -- and a lot of things change as you go through the education process. So.

Wilkerson: Well, this is the same thing I tell my son. I said, hey, okay, I said, when you grow up, you can say you had the urban experience and you travel with us on the time shares and everything. You know, like next year I mentioned I want to go to Paris and everything. You know, and I was telling him. I'm saying, I told him the story about Dr. McCarroll. I said, Paris, I said how many black kids that you know who are sixteen or seventeen years old can say that they've been to Paris, France, for two weeks and toured the Eiffel Tower and everything. Or how many kids can say that they've been to Morocco or Africa or what not. You know what I mean? And you know something, I said, I don't care whether you have two or three Ph.D.s, they can't take your whole traveling experience. They can't amount to that. If you go to a particular country and really want to learn and be earnest about looking at the different cultures of other countries, a degree doesn't mean anything with the knowledge that you've got from traveling. And that's why when you said that your daughter's in the Navy for five years, I know she gained a wealth of

knowledge of traveling. And that's what it's all about. You know, I'm not knocking college and what not and everything because it was great for me. But, you know, what's the use. My mother used to always said the most, what she used to say, the educated fool. How did she put that? Had something to do with the dumbest person is an educated fool or something. You have all your degrees on the wall and everything, but if I don't know your background or your culture or where the Brickus family came from or whether your father was a great [?] doesn't mean a thing.

Q: That's right. Now what impact do you think coming to Newark from the south might have had on dress styles? Did people dress differently, those who came from the south to Newark, did they dress differently and change after they got here or was it basically the same?

Wilkerson: Well, I would say in my neighborhood and community, everyone dressed the same during the day. I mean, during the weekday. On the weekends, that's when I, and I put this in quotes, quote, unquote, that's when the fashion show began. Sunday you had church. Everyone wanted to wear their Sunday best. And, I mean, that was in the south. You know, the little girls would wear the white dresses and what not. I mean, I remember my mother used to put so much rouge and lipstick on, and, you know, perfume. And I used to say, gee whiz, Mom, you're just going to church. Well, you know, if I don't dress up and everything I'm not serving the Lord right. You know what I mean? And then there was another underhanded plot, well, I can't let Sister Smith talk about me. Now that's in the church too. You know, on Saturday nights, I mean, hey, you put on your best dress and your suits and your black and white shoes, and you go into the bar and you just leave all your tensions and frustrations that you had on the job and you want to look sharp. On the weekends, yes. I would say. Cause I used to shine shoes on Fridays and Saturdays, and I used to hit these bars and everything, and that's when you saw everybody in their, I guess their zoot suits and everything, red suits and yellow suits and everything. But I mean these guys were looking sharp, and the women were looking were beautiful. But I'm sure come Monday morning everybody went back into their chauffeur's uniform or the laborer's uniform or their factory uniforms or whatever.

Q: I remember when I grew up and I never thought about it, you know, until I suppose now when I start to talk about it. But when I grew up in the south, we didn't go to church on Sunday without a hat on your head and gloves on your hands. You know. And then as time went on after I came here, you see more women in church without hats. And in recent years, I almost never see anybody with gloves. And in recent years --

Wilkerson: Except for an usher.

Q: An usher yes. And I begin to see women wearing pants coming to church.

Wilkerson: Okay. No. When I was growing up here in the late 40s or 50s, no a woman couldn't wear pants. As a matter of fact, the women who wore pants were looked upon as being manly. You know what I mean? I mean, women, really, women, when I was growing up, I very seldom saw women in pants. Unless they were doing a particular occupation that required pants. Now, I remember Dr. McCarroll used to wear pants and what not, but again, she was in a whole different level and what not. And I remember she used to wear pants poking around in her yard because she used to grow a lot of big flowers and everything and plant things and what not. And she'd be out there on her knees in dungarees and what not and everything. But that's very interesting. No. I never, ever saw women wear pants in Zion Hill Baptist Church.

Q: Well, we were not allowed to wear pants. As a matter of fact, there was two things that my father was very strict on. His daughters didn't wear pants and they didn't whistle.

Wilkerson: Okay.

Q: Were there in your neighborhood as you grew up, a sort of designation of, quote, unquote, fictive kin, where people were not related but blood, but because of the relationship and the concern that everybody in the community had for everybody else, they were more or less like relatives? I remember we used to call people who we barely knew Aunt Mary, Aunt, you know,

that kind of thing.

Wilkerson: Oh yeah. Yeah. We knew that we weren't blood relatives, but, you know, you had that name. I remember this guy named Uncle Buster. Now Uncle Buster was not related to me in one sense, but Uncle Buster was the real uncle of these two young ladies that lived across the street. So everybody knew Uncle Buster as Uncle Buster. I called him Uncle Buster. Uncle Buster would come by. I don't know where Uncle Buster lived, I don't know what he did, but he would come by and take them to the park, and or what we would do sometimes we'd all pack, he had a Hudson, a Hudson car. And I remember it was one of those long cars. It looked like a rocket ship. And he would pack all of us into the Hudson and take us to Weequake Park and buy us ice cream.

But, yeah, yeah, there was that semblance in everything. But we, it was, you know, I never knew Buster's last name. All I knew was Uncle Buster. But, yeah, there was that, you know, in my neighborhood. Or Auntie Jones or Grandma Phipps or something. You know what I mean? Yeah. And again, we didn't know what we were doing then, but that was in deference. I remember there was this elderly lady, I can't remember her name, but she was like in her eighties. And we used to call her grandma. And that was out deference and respect. You know what I mean? You know, hey grandma Emma, how you doing. You know what I mean? And, I mean, once you start talking to her, I mean, if you saw her and spoke to her it was like you were trying to get away from her cause grandma Emma would talk you to death. So sometimes, but you never tried to ignore her or what not. You know what I mean? Cause that was out of respect. You know what I mean? But sometimes I would see grandma Emma, and she used to always like my grandmother on my father's side, she used to always sniff snuff. And she would always want to hug and kiss you and everything, and you know, you're trying to, you know, snuff off. And my grandmother was like that. Boy, I used to, she used to buy Red Apple snuff, and she would come to me, and everyone referred to me as Tommie, my middle name, Tommie. And she would come and hug me, oh Tommie, so glad to see you. And Mrs. Brickus, I mean, snuff be all over. But yeah, yeah, grandma Emma was like that too. But you knew that if you saw her and she didn't see you, you'd go the other way because she would engage in a long conversation. But if she saw you,

then you had to, you know.

Q: Do you suppose the kind of deference that we gave to those persons who were not related to us might have had anything to do with the overall attitude or the overall relationship between those non-relatives and our families? And what I'm trying to ask, I think, is we talked about their being able to discipline us. Do you think the fact that we gave that kind of deference or because that was a part of our overall relationship with those persons, that that might have something to do with their willingness to discipline us and try to keep us headed in the right direction?

Wilkerson: The answer is yes. I would bring up two points. One, we didn't realize this or didn't see it then when we were like seven, eight, or nine or ten or twelve growing up, but after looking back upon it, I'm sure they were looking at us as future leaders carrying on tradition of African-American society. Going out here and making something of ourselves. They were probably proud of us. Somewhat envious of us. I remember I got, I remember when I got accepted to college. You know, like we went back to the old neighborhood, and, you know, like some of the sisters were saying, oh, you know, hugging my mother saying oh Lucille you did so much for him. You know what I mean. Now he's going to college and everything, and he's coming, and he's going to be making money, you just sit right down and let him serve you. You know. So, yes, yes. They were disciplining us for that reason. They saw something in us. They saw the continuation I think.

END SIDE ONE, TAPE TWO; BEGIN SIDE TWO, TAPE TWO

Wilkerson: They saw us as leaders of the future. They saw us as part of their heritage. Their America, their Africa. So, yes. And I don't think, I cannot remember any instance or situation where an elderly person ostracized or criticized me in any derogatory manner growing up. I mean, it was always, if I errored or did something wrong, it was always you know better than that. Make something of yourself and what not. It was a lecture, but it was not a negative lecture.

Q: Do you suppose we had that kind, that same kind of perspective for our youth now? If not, why not?

Wilkerson: You know, inwardly every parent wants to see their son or daughter go to Harvard or Yale or Morehouse and become great individuals such as Dr. King or Mary McCloud Bethune and what not. But, again, there are so many, what's the word I'm looking for. Being a wordsmith, I cannot even think. There are so many distractions. Yes. And being a parent and looking at my son, you know, every morning, every morning while I sit and talk with him and give him the, quote, unquote, lectures and what not, and his mother talks to him. Every morning I worry about him when he goes to school. Because out there or out here is a different world than his home. Now he has the tact and smarts to stay away from trouble and everything, but we didn't know. I mean, there was no drug culture when we were growing up. Now, we knew reefer was around. And that was what they called it when I was growing up, reefer. But the people who smoked the reefer was the night crowd, the night club crowd, you know what I mean, and the gangsters and what not. And, you know, we would see them coming by the neighborhoods and everything. But one thing I had to say about whenever the gangsters would come by and what not, they had the utmost respect. You know. Again, because everybody knew one another. You know what I mean? But, you know, nowadays, it's a nimby thing, not in my backyard. I don't want you in my backyard. I don't want you doing this and I don't want you doing that. And don't you reprimand my son because you don't have the right to reprimand my son. And don't you tell my daughter to do this and everything because who are you to tell my daughter. That's what missing today.

Q: I was gonna say. For every parent or every child that grows up in a home such as your son is growing up in, there must be twenty-five or thirty who come from those other type homes where there is no father, number one. The economic status is such that they cannot provide the kind of thing, and peer pressure is very strong. And I just kind of wonder what can we expect. I know, I have a good idea cause I've been around here for a very long time. What can we expect or how can we expect from the average African-American child what you can expect from your son in terms of him making something of himself as you say and his contribution to his society when he

becomes an adult as you are now?

Wilkerson: You know, I sit back and I look at my son. He's the best model I have. Being a teenager and I used to put myself in his position. The other day, the other day he called me at the office. He says, it's boring here listening to birds chirping. It's boring dad. At night we listen to the crickets. And I said, James, I said, hey, I told him the same thing. I said, do you realize how many kids would die to be in your place.

Q: What was he at camp?

Wilkerson: No. He was home. He was home that day. He had two days off. He was bored. I said, Jay, you got tapes to listen to, you got food in the refrigerator, the refrigerator is packed. I said, you're in a safe environment. You don't have to worry about. I said, and it's boring. I said, hey, I sure wish I was home today. You know. But they don't see this. They don't see this. But it's rough out there because there are so many distractions to them. There's peer pressure and what not. So being very honest with you, Mrs. Brickus, I deal with my son day by day. Day by day. I don't paint any goals, any, let's say, what's the word, any pseudo goals for him to pursue and what not. Day by day. I tell him, hey, you're a young African-American man. I said, when you're in South Orange, Livingston and what not, you got to walk the walk. You can't be doing your ghetto thing. You can't do your ghetto walk. You do your ghetto walk downtown Broad and Market. Cop stops you, you don't back talk. You know, if he ostracizes and criticizes you, if he calls you a nigger. You've been called a nigger before. Ain't gonna hurt you. Ain't gonna lose no sleep over it. You don't get emotional and what not. You treat him, you put the other foot, you turn everything around and show him that you are someone who has intelligence enough to respect him, and in that turn you get his respect.

I have him reading Long Walk to Freedom now by Mandela. And he's on the chapter where Mandela's in Robin Island. And he was saying, gee whiz Dad, I don't think I could have gone through what Mandela did. I said, how do you know until you're there. I said, he went through it. So this is all fascinating to him, but he wants to go to college. And what I'm trying to

instill in him now is don't go to college because I want you to go or your mother wants you to go. You want to go.

Q: He's gonna be a senior at St. Benedict's this year?

Wilkerson: Yes. You want to go. Now, if you don't go to college, I'm not gonna be mad at you, and she's not gonna be mad at you. And your world's not gonna end. But now what I want you to do is have an alternative to college. A decent job, or if you feel, you know, he's talking about the military. I said, hey, the military ain't bad. I said, but you have to realize when you're in the military, it's the difference between your mother or my saying, Jason, could you cut the light out. In the military they'll say, light out, now. Different tone of voice. I said, now that's discipline. And I said once you get in the military, you just can't walk away and say, well, I quit. Because then you're AWOL, and you get a dishonorable discharge and a dishonorable discharge is worse than a prison record. Cause you can't get no mortgage, you can't get no loans. Now see these are all the things that I tell him. I said, now, the military is even more serious than college. I said, cause you can leave college. You can go to college today and say, hey, I don't like it here, I'm going. But I said, once you get in the military, and you raise that hand, you're theirs. Now do you want to follow that path? So I deal with him on a day to day basis and everything. I just want, what I'm trying to instill in him, Mrs. Brickus, is to have the self-esteem, the wherewithal, and know himself. Like Socrates said, know thyself. You know what I mean? And once you get that, then you have all types of avenues that you can pick from.

Q: What percentage of graduates from St. Benedict's do go on to college? Do you know?

Wilkerson: Oh yes. I would say about eighty percent. The school is predominantly African-American. You know, they cater to African-Americans. There is a support system there. There's a support system there. But I told him, I said, hey, I can lead you to a glass of water, but I can't make you drink. You have to have the thirst for intellect and knowledge. And if you're not thirsty, well hey, no need of you to waste the water.

Q: Be a waste of your resources to send him to college if he's not in tune. Do you remember how prevalent the use of intoxicants and other substances were among African-Americans as you grew up? Especially among those persons who came from the south to Newark.

Wilkerson: You mean like beer, liquor and?

Q: Yeah. And drugs or beer and liquor and.

Wilkerson: You know, I mean, like I say, we didn't come in contact with the drug culture. I mean, we knew it was out there, but the drugs were like with the fast class. You know, the schuysters and what not, you know. I saw, I didn't see a plethora of alcoholism. I mean, everybody on a Friday night, you know, after you'd been working and slaving all day and what not and everything all week, you know, you would have a drink. You would go around the corner to the Meyer's Tavern on Belmont Avenue, which was right next to the Baer's supermarket. It was between the Baer's supermarket and Fischer's Bakery. And there was this one particular gentleman named Rudy, on Fridays, you know, Rudy would have a couple of drinks and come home and raise all kind of hell. And the cops knew him. I mean, every Friday they were there. You know, they'd just take him on the stoop and sit down and talk with Rudy and what not. Hey, Monday morning, Rudy's the nicest guy you ever want to meet. Hello, mam. How are you Mrs. Brickus. You know, it was just. You know, and Rudy didn't mean any harm. I mean, you know, Rudy would fall asleep on the steps. You know what I mean? That was the extent of the intoxication that I witnessed. I mean, everybody drank, had a beer and what not. I mean, Krueger was right down the street. And you had Ballantine and what not and all. But, you know, I don't know that today. You know what I mean? I mean, you worked hard and everything, you know, and you get paid and, you know, I think everyone is entitled to their, anything that can relax them and what not and everything.

Q: So long as they don't go to the extreme.

Wilkerson: Yeah. Yeah. And so long as they don't harm not only themselves, but other people. And that's what the judge will tell you. I mean, the judge will tell you, hey, you know, if you want to get high whether it's on drugs or alcohol or whatever, as long as your door is locked and you're in your house, minding your business, you have big fun. But when you go out here endangering the lives of others, this is when I have to step in. You're driving intoxicated and what not, or you're walking down the street acting all crazy and what not and everything. But, you know, there was the salvation, there was the church that the church that took care of that. You know what I mean? On a Sunday. And you watch, there's this movie called Woman With the Blue Dress On by Denzel Washington and everything.

Q: I saw that.

Wilkerson: Okay. Hey, you remember everybody was partying Saturday night and everything, but Sunday morning everybody was in church and what not and everything. And that's the way it was. I mean, you know, it was stressful, you know, to hear about someone robbing someone or jerking somebody's pocketbook. I mean, if John who lives down at one end of the street, jerked your pocketbook, John would be confronted. His parents would be confronted by it. And John would be so embarrassed and his parents would be so embarrassed that they would either have to move out of the neighborhood, now this is the police is not involved in this. But see, again, that is the close knit environment persists. You know what I mean? If someone, if you had a son or daughter and they were accused and this and that and everything, the people would come to you and say, gee Mrs. Brickus, you know, your daughter was in my store the other day, and I saw her take a, you know, a half a meatloaf or something like that. I don't want to. I'm coming to you. You know what I mean. Instead of going to get the police and what not and everything. Let you deal with that. That was the, you know, that was the support system we had. You know, I mean, if maybe there could have been a problem. You know, well gee whiz Mrs. Brickus, you know, I mean, she took some meat. I mean, you all got enough for the next week? Or, you know what I mean? That was, this was the Jewish man. This was the Jewish man. Because the Jewish, for some reason he knew that, he knew that people were coming to his store. I mean, I stole apples

and oranges off of stands and what not and everything. You know what I mean? I mean, you know, I'm being honest. I'm not dishonest like Bill Clinton. [Laughter] What did he say? He didn't inhale.

Q: He didn't inhale. When he was at Oxford, did he smoke marijuana? He said, yeah, I smoked it but I didn't inhale it. And he was later asked if he would have smoked marijuana now, would you inhale. And he laughed and said yes he would.

Wilkerson: But what I'm saying is we all had our little, you know.

Q: That was just a part of --

Wilkerson: Growing up.

Q: --youth. Growing up. Becoming whatever you are and everything. Do you think that the use of such substances as cigarette smoking and dipping snuff and chewing tobacco is any different in the south than it was here in Newark?

Wilkerson: Let me tell you something. Interesting thing about it is. My son's mother caught him with a pack of cigarettes about a year ago. She saw him over Newport Sands. He was just walking along and everything. He was going over there. And she called me. She said, guess what? I just busted Jason. I said, oh. I said, okay. So I said what. And she was all upset. You know. Now this is where the male psyche differs from the female psyche. You know, she started going on it's bad for his health and this and that and what not and everything. And he had no disrespect for me because when he was smoking the cigarette and everything, he didn't put it out, put it on the ground and everything and all of that. Okay. Let's look at it this way. I said, once he is out of our sight, there's no need for you to be worrying about that. You know. I said, smoking a cigarette is minor. You know. Now, had he been smoking that other thing out here on the street or had some liquor on him, I said, then we would have to react. We would have to work on it.

And it goes back to her upbringing because her mother caught her smoking some Malboros or Pall Malls. And her mother smoked also. And her mother put her in a closet and made her practically smoke the whole pack. And I said, I'm not saying that was bad for you or good for you what your mother did at that time, she had to do. But I said, what I'll do when he get home, I'll just talk about it. And I'll do a laughing thing. You know. Cause I smoke a pipe. You know what I mean? And I can't throw stones at him cause I'm in a glass house. So, I said, I did it when I was a boy. It's a man's thing. You know, you're feeling macho and everything. I said it's peer pressure and everything. I said, try not to go overboard with this. You know what I mean? Cause then it will just make him rebel and what not.

So he walked in, he walked in the house. And I said, wow, how you doing? Oh, everything's fine. So and I had run out of pipe tobacco or I forgot to get some pipe tobacco. Cause I usually smoke a pipe around the house. So he comes. He was looking at me. You know, so he just walked in the room. You know, golly, sure wish I had a cigarette. So, you know, I'm playing on him. So, he said, well, dad, give me some money and I can go get some for you. I said, you gonna get cigarettes. I said, why do they give you cigarettes and what not. Yeah, I can get some cigarettes. So, I looked at him and I said, nigger, give me one of those Marlboros your mother caught you with. He broke up. He broke, I mean, we both laughed. You know. That's how I. He said, wow, dad. She called you? And I said, yeah. And he said, well, yeah. I said, she's not so pissed off about your smoking. I said, she's upset that you didn't throw the cigarette down. He said, Dad, I had just bought those. So we sat down and we talked. And I'm saying, look, I said, you're being a boy, and I've done everything you're doing. But I said, you know, I said, first of all you've got to be a little cool. You never know when you're going to run into your mom out here and what not and everything. You know, just be aware, and you know, just handle it. You know what I mean? So, yes, once in a while he comes in and he's smelling like the cigarette. And when I'm cleaning up the house and everything, you know, I'll see his Joe Camels and what not. And I'll just take it and throw it in the garbage. And he doesn't come in and where's my cigarettes. You know what I mean? So, it's just a quiet way of, you know what I mean. And that's how I handled that.

Q: And you guys understand each other. That's the important thing. You understand each other so you don't have to go through these tantrums and screaming and hollering and punishment and all that.

Wilkerson: Yeah. Yeah. Because that will just make him rebel. You know, whereas, she went off. And, I mean, I'm saying, hey, forget about that. Are you with him in school, after work and after school? Let's just hope that there's not a knock on the door, and we open the door and it's the police.

Q: How did the grownups or the mothers handle illnesses whether they were children or whether they were other adult family members as you grew up? Were there use of home remedies or did you?

Wilkerson: Father John's. I grew up on Father John's. And.

Q: What's Father John's?

Wilkerson: Father John's was a cough syrup. A cough syrup. It had a picture of a white man on it. A big bottle. And whenever I had a cough or whatever, I took Father John's. And then the Watkins man would come around selling the Watkins products. You know, soap and what not? And he sold a Watkins liniment. And I remember when I had a cold, my mother used to make a stinky, smelly ball of wax and all sorts of stuff that one of my grandmother's remedies. And I used to wear it around my neck.

Q: Garlic and --

Wilkerson: Yeah.

Q: Onions. And.

Wilkerson: Yeah, but it was a ball. It was a ball. [Laughter] It was a ball and she had a string that she would have this ball go through, and I would go to classroom, I'd go to school, and people, you know, you could smell it. You know what I mean? And I used to hate that, you know. Then there was castor oil, three 6s. We didn't go to the hospital. I mean, I know, we had the home remedies. But those were the remedies that I grew up on. You know, chicken soup and this ball and what not. I remember one time I had, I can't remember what I had, but she rubbed me down in camphor oil and what not. Rubbed my whole body and everything and put a blanket around me and I sweated it out. But those were home remedies and everything. Bluing. She used to use bluing. I mean, she used bluing to clean, matter of fact, she had the bluing she used to use when she was in service cleaning the silverware. You know what I mean? She brought some bluing home one day. She say, this is good. This is good for you if you had dandruff in your hair and what not. I didn't know. You know, I was afraid to use it in those days. But those were the home remedies.

No doctors. I mean, if something was real serious, you know, we could go around the corner to Dr. Year or Dr. McCarroll, you know, would write us a little prescription and tell us what to get. And there are several families, like if they didn't have any money, you know, Dr. McCarroll would say, you know, we'll do an installment thing or something. You know, you give me five dollars this week, five dollars next week.

Q: Is Dr. McCarroll still living?

Wilkerson: No. She's deceased. Yeah. I think she moved out to Arizona because she had to because of her health and everything. And she's deceased. She died in Arizona back in the 70s.

Q: I see. What about the birth of children? Were there any midwives practicing in Newark did you know, or were children born at hospitals?

Wilkerson: Yeah. There was this one lady who, I can't remember her name, she lived in the next block of Hillside. And her name was Mrs. Victoria or whatever. But she also gave births. She

was a midwife, but she also, she could also abort babies also. And she got into, she got, yeah, she went to jail because I think she did a botched abortion or something like that and everything. I don't know how the police found out about it, but, yeah, she was the only person that I knew of. And again, she was somewhat shady because she ran in a faster crowd and everything. But she could deliver. She was, you know, she was a midwife and everything. And a lot of, you know, a lot of people I think were somewhat hesitant in having her as a midwife and everything, but not hesitant if a young lady was pregnant. You know what I mean? They would go right to her and what not. And, you know, there were rumors that she used to make a lot of money on abortions.

Q: You know, also another thing that was prevalent among many, not certainly not all persons who lived or grew up in the south, but there were a lot of people who believed in fixing, like whodo and voodoo and conjure and all that kind of thing.

Wilkerson: Oh yeah. Yeah. The Opi Man and everything. Yeah. Yeah. Huh. I didn't know anything about that. The closest thing that I can remember was that some gypsies lived, some gypsies used to come through all the time. You know, they had big Cadillacs and all like that and everything. You know, my mother used to always say don't you get mixed up with them. They'll steal and rob you blind. And they would always do the fortune telling thing, and they would always have candles and what not and everything coming by. You know, and what not. But there's a song called, this is a song, this is a 1953 or 54 if I can recollect. It was a song called I Put a Spell on You by Screaming Jay Hawkins. And my uncle had just gotten from, he had just been to Korea and he was home from Korea, and he lived across the street from us. And I used to listen to all his songs and what not. But he used to love that song, I Put a Spell on You. And that's when, you know, I started learning about the spells and the voodoo and what not and everything. But I imagine that was prevalent. I know that was prevalent in southern Louisiana with Congo Square and the slaves and what not. You know, in New Orleans. And what not and all. You know, but, no, not too many people would do that. You know, the gypsies would come around and they would burn the candles and everything. And they would tell us all nonsense like, you know, you rub this oil and you wake up the next day a millionaire. All that crazy stuff.

Q: I can remember, even after I came to New Jersey to live, I remember people going down to New Orleans on buses to see the Seven Sisters. They were supposed to be.

Wilkerson: Oh yeah. The Seven Sisters. Yeah. When I go down that way now, well everything, you know, like, you know, it's just like when I go down there to lecture at Dillard or Tulane and what not, you know. And my son, he's never been to New Orleans, but he's fascinated by that. You know what I mean? So I tell him the next time I'm going to take you down there. You know, you go to madam such and such a shop and everything. I said, but Jay, but that's, you know, that's commercial. You know, don't get caught up in it. Although, I'll put it this way. I don't knock anyone who believes in it. If that's your belief and you found it to be beneficial or whatever, fine. But the closest to that were the gypsies. They would come around and everything. They had like a little cart and everything, and they played music and they'd sell oils and what not.

Q: What about pets as you grew up? Did you have any pets or did people around you in your community have pets?

Wilkerson: Well, dogs were. I don't remember anybody having pets really. I mean, you'd see a dog, you know, this and that. I mean we knew cats existed, but they coexisted with us.

END SIDE TWO, TAPE TWO; BEGIN SIDE ONE, TAPE THREE

Q: Mr. Wilkerson, how did the incidents of crime compare in Newark with that in the, as far as you can remember, about crime among especially young people in the south?

Wilkerson: I have no recollection of comparing crime in the south and crime in Newark. I know that crime among young people was definitely at a minimum during the early 50s, even up to, all throughout the entire 50s, even when I was graduated from high school in 61. I mean, there were situations or instances of truancy, fighting, you know, in the classroom or fighting on the school grounds or street brawling and what not and everything, but it was never with weapons or

anything. If you fought, you know, you fought with your hands and what not. And after the battle was over, it was over. You know, whether you won or whether you lost, it was, there was always an unwritten rule, okay, hey you beat me fair and square. But let's face it, a lot of people felt that they wanted to come back for revenge and what not and all. So you just go back and get beaten again. And sometimes the second whipping was all you needed.

There are gangs. I don't like to refer, maybe I shouldn't refer to them as gangs. They were like social clubs. Because, I mean, they all grew out of some social activities, whether it was baseball or dancing or roller skating or what not. But they were depicted as gangs. There was this one particular gang called the Gloom Street Raiders, Twentieth Century Gang, got a girl group called the Rockettes. And the only time they would surface is like during parties and what not and everything. It was mainly over turf. You know, if you went to a party on the other side of Springfield Avenue, then you were definitely out of your turf, and expected to be confronted. Particularly if you were dating a young lady or, you know, someone knew that you were from the other side of town, then you would have to show your mettle and what not. But other than that, you know, other than the regular, the minimal, quote, unquote, crimes. I don't express them as crimes. They were like misdemeanors, you know, truancy and what not and all. And there were many instances when if you lived in a community and people found out about your misdeeds and what not, you know, they would even tell their kids to stay away from you and not to play with you. So you would see some sort of disdain in your neighbors eyesight or what not. People may not speak to you, or they'd pass you and they'd mumble at you and everything, or look at you. You know, and some of the looks that you would get, you would feel so guilty and everything. You would feel an effect.

Q: How can we explain then the evolution of juvenile participation in crime as we see it today?

The car jackings and the car thefts and the drive by shootings, and anybody who wants a gun, gets a gun. How do we explain that?

Wilkerson: I think that society, and I'm no psychologist or sociologist, but I think that we've just evolved to a state that juvenile crimes are just rampant. There's no respect for the law. And why should there be respect for the law? Kids see it. Because the law is disrespectful, and the law in

some instances is corrupt. There's no support system in a lot of communities. A lot of the communities are transient communities. A lot of these kids parents are in essence babies. You know, you see, you know, young ladies walking the streets. And, you know, I'm not knocking them because, you know, I mean, that was a predicament they're in and what not. And I imagine, you know, a sixteen year old mother with a two year old kid is trying to deal with the situation as best as she know how as a sixteen year old as compared to a thirty-four year old woman. But there's so much. You know, there's television, there's other mediums, music, the gangster rap and what not and everything. Worshipping guns and machismo and being macho and what not and everything. We didn't encounter that. I mean, if that existed when I was growing up, it wasn't as prevalent. Like I said earlier, I mean, we knew that there were reefers, but, you know, I mean, but no one around us smoked reefer and what not and everything. You know, you would have an adult go into a liquor store and maybe get some, what was the wine we used to like to drink in high school? Oh, what was the name of that wine? Little cheap wine.

Q: Gallo.

Wilkerson: No. In a big bottle. But anyway, it was ninety-nine cent wine. You know what I mean? You know, you going to a party, you know what I mean, you know, you take a couple of gulps and everything and what not. But, and that was only on the weekends. I mean, it wasn't excessive like every day.

Q: Probably had a greater psychological effect than physical.

Wilkerson: Yeah. Yeah. We thought we were adults and what not and everything. You know what I mean? You know, it just make you feel six feet tall or what not and everything. But I think today's kids are really reaching out. They want to be helped and they want to know how they can be helped. But I don't think that society is able to help them. If society was able to help them, why would there be drive by shootings? Why would there be gangster rap? An interesting thing about it is who's making all this money off the music industry. You know, white entrepreneurs.

Q: Why do you think the community is unable to help our youth?

Wilkerson: Well, it's an transient community. It doesn't have the support system it had when I was growing up. You know, let me explain something to you, and this is just my personal opinion. This is just my personal belief. I sincerely believe that the worst thing happened to African-American society was the lifting of segregation. I tell you the reason why. Because when you had segregation, you had your support system. Everybody worked. We had a common boogie man to fight. We had a common goal to reach in life and in society. The doctors lived with the laborers in the neighborhood and what not. Why, because of segregation. So you had more of a family, you had more of a support system here. You knew the odds against you if you stepped out of that support system and tried to make it on your own out here in the, quote, unquote, white world. But now everything is, you have the nuclear family, quote, unquote, whatever that is. You know. So upbeat and what not. Everyone exploring different aspects of their lives and everything. The parents are even searching.

You know, here we are trying to get to the moon and what not, but we're not helping our young people out. Everything is so fast paced. You know, here we are about to enter another century and everything, and forecast states that it's even going to be more competitive in the next century than this century because you're having a mixture of different races, different cultures, multi-culturalism is taking place, taking hold now. The high technology community is questioning itself now. You're having mergers with banks and what not. You know what I mean? You're having this company suing that company. And there's just so much going on now to survive for the adults that the average young kid on the street is saying, well, gee whiz, I don't have anybody to help me so I'm gonna make it on my own.

But I don't have an answer. You know, I don't know what we can do to resolve this dilemma. And we're moving into the next century and it's just going to escalate. I mean, if you want to do a whole international thing now. You have the lifting, I mean, the Soviet Union, there's no big, bad Soviet Union again terrorizing Europe and the national security of this country. But, with the breaking up of all the Soviet states, you have crime rampant over there, you have Soviet criminals coming over here now, you got the drug trade and what not and everything. And, you

know, I had a friend who worked with the Justice Department, and he told me, he said, you know, you're gonna never, ever stop the drug trade. And I'm almost inclined to believe what Paul Kirk, the Mayor of Baltimore, has professed on numerous occasions. Legalize it. Once you legalize it, then you knock out the barrons, you know what I mean. Look at cigarettes. Legal. Look at alcohol. Once you legalize it, then it wouldn't, then the mystique would disappear and what not.

Q: Well, I don't know whether I agree wholeheartedly with that for several reasons. That even if it were legalized, someone has to still supply it. We don't grow drugs here.

Wilkerson: True.

Q: And we don't import them. You know, so, I wonder how much it would help if it were legalized. But we'll save that for another day. What do you remember about African-Americans or our community helping one another in Newark? For instance, well you talked a little earlier about if needed to borrow a cup of sugar or some whatever, flour or whatever we didn't have. But beyond that if there were families in need in the community, did we rally around them?

Wilkerson: Yes. Yes. The problems that we had when I was growing up, for some reason, the main problem we had was fires. I mean, Jesus Christ a fire. And, you know, for some strange reason, and I guess it was attributed to the Christmas decorations and the trees. I mean, everybody had a tree at Christmas. But fires would always, you would always an excess amount of fires around the Christmas holidays. But there were people, there was the church who would come to the aid of burned out families and victims and what not. And I imagine the Fire Department had some type of a program. I remember the Red Cross.

I remember on Avon Place, this was back in 49 or 50, there was one hell of a fire. And I think that was in Eugene Campbell's building. Gene Campbell's building was a big, bright orange building. But anyway, that place burned to the ground. And I remember the Red Cross trucks and what not and everything out there. You had the NAACP went on a clothing collection drive and what not. I'm surmising a lot of the families, victimized families, were taken in, you know, by

families within the community and the neighborhood. And there was also an embarrassed, there was also a sense of embarrassment. I mean, here you were burned out and everything, and you're walking down the street with someone else's clothes on or shoes and everything. Because, you know, I've never been burned out. God forbid I hope I'm never burned out. But I imagine that's a humiliating experience.

Q: I would imagine.

Wilkerson: But there was support here. Yes. There was that support here. You know, in time of distress and need, there was someone there. Church would come by and what not. And, you know, if the family didn't have any food, or someone couldn't pay their rent, or was about to be evicted, we would have rent parties. You know about the rent parties?

Q: I knew about them.

Wilkerson: Yeah. You know, you throw a party.

Q: Even if you weren't burned out, some people would have a party for their own rent.

Wilkerson: Yeah. You know, you throw a rent party, you know what I mean, and you get some people to make some cakes and pies and what not. You know what I mean? And you buy some liquor and you sell the liquor there, which was illegal.

Q: Water it down a bit.

Wilkerson: Yeah. Yeah. And, you know, after the party is over, you got your rent for the next couple of months, a couple of weeks.

Q: What about race relations between whites and blacks in general in Newark as you grew up?

Wilkerson: You know, growing up in the Central Ward, the old Third Ward, on Hillside Place, being very honest with you, I never encountered that. Because we grew up in a predominantly African-American community. When we would go downtown and what not, shine shoes or go downtown to the theaters or what not, or shopping and everything, you had, you know, that's when we would come in contact with white people and what not. But and if they did, if they did taunt you with a racial remark or something of this nature, you know, you just roll off your back and everything. You didn't get emotional and everything and what not. And I mean it would be. I remember one time at Kresge's or one of the stores, this lady, this white lady, so long in waiting on me. I don't know whether she saw me or what. She came over, and I can't remember what she said, but, you know, it was to the effect do you want anything. If you don't want anything, why are you standing here. Or something like that. But, you know, that was just one isolated incident. It was always rumored that you never did go over in the North Ward because that was the Italian section. You never did go over, you never up in the West Ward because you had a majority of Polish people there. But, you know, it was really strange because I had friends that went to Central High School, and during the 50s and the late 50s, Central High School was predominantly Polish. And I don't remember any incidents any everything occurring over there race related. I mean, you know, Barringer I used to hear rumors about if you went over to Barringer, the black women had no problem going to Barringer High School, but a black guy had a problem going to Barringer. But then there was always that athleticism that existed. That if you were a well-defined athlete or excelled in athletics, you were accepted. At Weequake there were no race incidents, racial incidents. I mean, the Jewish kids were extremely passive. The majority of the athletes when I was in high school over there were black athletes that excelled and what not. And if they did call you out your name, naturally they wouldn't speak English. So you never knew, you know, what they were saying anyway.

But the only thing I mentioned when I brought up was, earlier was Hanes Department Store was always a target of the NAACP because they didn't. Not only did they hire, they did not hire African-American people, they wouldn't let African-Americans shop at Hanes.

Q: But overall then, it was an understood kind of barrier that separated the white community from

the black community?

Wilkerson: Right.

Q: In general. You knew where you could and could not go, and what you could and could not do.

Wilkerson: Yeah. And you didn't have Italian, you didn't have Italian kids coming into Central Ward, nor did you have Polish kids coming into the Central Ward. I mean, you would meet. You know how you co-existed with them was through athletics, sports. If you were going to Southside, you had to play Central or Westside or Barringer in a particular sport, whether it was football, baseball, basketball.

Q: When African-Americans migrated from the south into Newark, do you think that their coming might have had any impact on our leisure time activities, such as cookouts and barbecues and picnics and that kind of thing? Or were black folk doing that as far back as you can remember?

Wilkerson: I would say that the cookouts and picnics and what not, I think, in my opinion I think they emanated, you know, from the south and everything, and we just brought, when we came here, we migrated north, we just brought a lot of, you know, that with us. You know, the cooking out, the cookouts and what not and everything. I don't think everything started after we got here. Just like we brought okra with us, and we brought collard greens, spinach and carrots and fried corn.

Q: How, do you remember how people who, new immigrants from the south came into Newark, how were they treated by people who had been here a long time?

Wilkerson: You're talking about African-American people who had been here for a long time or?

Q: Right. Other African-Americans who had been migrated from the south and had been in Newark long enough to learn the ropes, put down their roots, and when new people came, how were they received by those persons?

Wilkerson: Well, I think that on the surface, I think that the church. Let me regress. The church, in my opinion, was the key, quote, unquote, campground or key meeting ground. Because when one, when one joined the church or what not and everything, they were accepted as Christians and someone in that particular church congregation, whether it's a deacon or the deaconess had to relate to that person geographically as well as culturally, naturally. Because someone was either from that particular town or hamlet or state of that individual, and that's where they were embraced. Outside of the church, on the street and what not or within a community, I think I had mentioned, you know, we as kids we sort of ostracized the kid who came from the south and what not because of his or her talk or his clothing. You know what I mean and what not? You know, and we were ignorant, not realizing that, you know, if we were not from that particular South Carolina town or what not, maybe our parents or grandparents were. But I think that the church was the prime element that one felt comfortable in when he or she migrated north or what not. Particularly if they didn't know anybody. You know, the church would embrace them and what not. I remember this particular family. I don't know whether they had just come up or not, but they didn't have any money, and they were a family of mother and husband and wife and about two or three kids. You know. And one thing, you know, we collected some money for them and what not. But I think the church played a pivotal role in welcoming new immigrants from the south. Particularly new African-Americans. And I think that's where it had to start from. The welcoming had to come from within the African-American community. I mean, I would be, I mean, it would be ridiculous to say that if I came from, you know, South Boston, Virginia, that I was going to go to the North Ward. And perhaps maybe I would have been accepted, but there would have been a feeling of being uncomfortable and what not. So I think the church played a pivotal role. Those are one of the pluses that I have of the black church. That I really have a lot of respect for the black church. I mean, there are other situations that are within the black church as far as the gossiping and the scandals and everything that I detest.

Q: Well, I think that's always a part of black church life. I also think to myself and had often said, that we, as black Christians, have not evolved from that slave mentality. To the point that we are independent thinkers and developing our own philosophy of our own life experience. We have been too willing to let other people decide our. And I don't see us moving away from that to the extent that I think we ought to or that we need to if we're ever going to be relevant in this society. Because as long as we let people define us, as long as we let people determine, you know, our --

Wilkerson: Do the thinking for us.

Q: Then, yeah, we're always going to be right where we are. And I guess maybe I don't know whether I'm ahead of my time or behind my time, but I just don't see how we could ever hope to change the status quo unless we change our own relationships with one another.

Wilkerson: That's right.

Q: And our own --

Wilkerson: And with ourselves.

Q: --and I was going say our own images of ourselves as individuals as well as as a people.

Wilkerson: I could just bring up an example. Zion Hill Baptist Church. There was this guy, Milton Wesley, fantastic organist. Gospel organist. He went to Arts High School. Very creative, music wise and what not. He was dating this young lady, Thelma. Thelma lived somewhere around here. She went to Westside. To make a long story short, he knocked her up. That's the expression we used to use in those days. And, you know, they had to stand before the deaconess board, the church board, and this board and that board. But they kicked them out of the church. You know, and I felt that this was the time when they needed God. They needed the church. You know what I mean? And you had deacons up there saying that, gee, and I don't want to mention

their names and everything cause they're probably dead and everything, but you may know some of them. And they were saying, well, gee whiz, you know, God didn't. You know. And this was about when I was about seventeen or sixteen, and that's when I really started, really started looking at the black church, Mrs. Brickus. And these same deacons up there, I could never prove this, but it was always rumored that they were dating this sister or, you know, trying to get next to this usherette. You know what I mean? But, you know, when I saw that, and I mean it was very humiliating for them to stand up there with their little baby. You know, and, you know, to this very day, I don't know where Milton is and I don't know where Thelma is, but if they have no disrespect for the black church, then, hey, I cannot knock them.

Q: They have to be children of God if they don't have, you know, if they can feel respect and relate to the black church.

Wilkerson: Took their membership.

Q: You know what happened though Mr. Wilkerson, if that shows an ignorance on our part of Bible history. Cause people have not changed. Human nature has not changed one iota. Customs may have changed. Okay? But we haven't changed. And we will not change because God made us for a certain purpose.

Wilkerson: I remember when I was, after Reverend Pullen died, Reverend John R. Stanford became president of, pastor, minister of Zion Hill Baptist Church. And at that particular time, he was in Atlantic City and everything. But there was even dissension among, within the deacon board and everything, and there were about three or four ministers who, I mean, deacons who resented this. They didn't want the man to come and become the pastor of this church because the man had a BS degree from Shaw. He had gone to Union Theological or Crossier Theological. One of those schools. I think it was Crossier Theological School in Pennsylvania and everything. But it was just the resistance that he encountered, and his wife, Sister Stanford. She taught school in the public. It was just the resistance that they encountered because they were educated. You

know, and Reverend Stanford was the type of a guy who would get up there, and, you know, he would use different verbiage than dus and don't, and you know what I mean. He was an educated man. They resisted that.

Q: Well, that goes back to what I said a little while ago about our not being far enough removed from that slave mentality. Now we got to bring this back to Owen Wilkerson the person. What kind of work was your first paying job?

Wilkerson: My first paying job was. Paying job. Now, you don't mean part time job. You mean after.

Q: Whether it was part time or whether it was a full time adult job. What?

Wilkerson: My first adult paying job?

Q: What was the first job that you had that you earned money doing? Whether it was part time or.

Wilkerson: Okay. My first job, my paying job, was after I graduated from high school. I graduated from high school in January, 62, and my first job was at Cooper Sportswear. They're on Elizabeth Avenue I understand. Frelinghuysen Avenue. But at that particular time, they were on Sherman Avenue. And I had gone.

END SIDE ONE, TAPE THREE; BEGIN SIDE TWO, TAPE THREE

Q: You were saying that your first job was at Cooper.

Wilkerson: Cooper Sportswear. Yeah. They were located on Sherman Avenue, back in 61. I graduate from high school in January, 61. And that was my first job.

Q: How long did you work there?

Wilkerson: I worked there until September of 61 when I went to college, but it was an interesting experience. I saw a lot and I learned a lot. Similar to what my son learned working nine months part time and full time. By my graduating from Weequake High School, which at that particular time, I'm not beating my chest and everything, but at that particular time Weequake High School was probably the second or third best academic school in Essex County. Very, I mean, you had all Jewish students over there, predominantly Jewish school. The school was well rated and everything in all aspects, and so when they found out that I had gone to Weequake, I'll never forget Sidney Cooper, old man Cooper, I didn't know his first name cause he was like in his seventies and eighties, but Sidney and Mort were the owners. Sidney Cooper sat we down, and he said, Tom, he says, you graduated from Weequake. I said, yes. He says, well, he says, I'm looking for someone to be here permanently. You know. And he says, what are you gonna do. He says, you know, you're coming out of Weequake, you know I know you're not gonna be around here long. And it was within the community, I mean, we would always say, you would hear my aunts and my mother say this, when you're going and looking for a job, don't tell them you're going to college because then they won't hire you. You know what I mean? So, I said, well, you know, I said, I was seriously thinking about, you know. And he stopped, he said, cut the BS out. You know. I'm gonna call your guidance counselor tomorrow and what not, and just see where you're headed and what direction you're headed in life. You know. He said, I really, he said, I really want you to be very honest with me and up front with me. When September comes, what's gonna happen to you. And I told him, I said, I'll be going to college. And he said, okay. I appreciate your being honest. Had you told me no, I would have shown you the door. So he wanted to put me in the office because that was, it was the mentality, his mentality was here was a black man that, a young black kid that did not need to be working in shipping and what not. He wanted me to be in the office and do invoices and what not and everything. And I told him, I said, you know, I said, I want to work in shipping. And he wanted to know why I wanted to work in shipping, which was less money. And I told him, I said, I just want to go, I just want to see what life is really about. You know what I mean? I want to get my hands dirty and what not. And he looked at me as if I was

crazy. But he had the utmost respect for me because I was level, I was honest. And it was great because I got a chance to mingle with the brothers. All the cats were in shipping, and I mean these guys were, you know, ex-cons and what not and everything. But I did not want to subject myself as to being placed on his pedestal. You know what I mean? I didn't want to subject myself to being placed on their pedestal. I had my own pedestal. And this is what I try to relate to my son today.

Make a long story short, I worked there that whole summer. Went to college. Wrote him a nice letter on the college stationary and what not and everything. Went back there that next summer and worked the summer of my sophomore year in 62. And could have, could have, after I got out of college, could have gone back there in a very high managerial position. But, you know, it was a factory. You know, I'm saying to myself, you know, how far can I get in a factory. You know what I mean? I wouldn't be getting my hands dirty and what not and all. But I worked there up until September of 91.

Q: What lead you to Coopers in the first place? Why did you go there to look for a job?

Wilkerson: Just going through the papers. Combing through the papers. My first, I used to get paid something like, I think I got paid like thirty-three, thirty-four dollars a week.

Q: What did you think about the job? Now you chose to go into the, what was it, shipping?

Wilkerson: Yeah. I chose to go into shipping. Yeah.

Q: What did you think about the job once you got started doing it?

Wilkerson: Well, I knew that I was going to college in September and everything so, you know, I took a lot of. You know, I mean a lot of the guys found out that I was from Weequake, and a lot of the guys found out that I had ran track and I was athlete and all. So, you know, we would talk about sports and what not and everything. And then, you know, I caught a lot of resentment and

everything. You know, envy. You know, one guy came to me said to me, Jesus Christ, you know, my brother had applied here and everything. You know, he has a wife and kids living on Prince Street and everything. You know what I mean? And you knocked him out of the box and everything. And I can't remember what my reply was to him at that particular time. But, you know, I was just looking forward to September. As far as I was concerned, there was a little bit of money in my pocket. A little bit of spending change. And it was an experience that I could put on the resume that I've done this.

Q: What were the general working conditions like at the?

Wilkerson: It was a factory. They made sportscoats and leather jackets and what not and everything. Regular factory. Half an hour lunch. I had no problems there. You know, I was young. I was flirting with the ladies and what not and everything. You had, at that particular time, you had a, I think just the beginning of a large hispanic presence in the City of Newark. This was in the early 60s. You know what I mean? And, you know, I would flirt with the hispanic ladies and everything and what not and all. Interesting there were all hispanic women. No black women. But there were all black guys in the shipping. You know. And, you know, I got along well. They would, you know, I mean word got around that I was, that I had turned an offer down working in the office and what not. And they wanted to know why.

Q: Did the, how did the hispanics and the blacks get along in?

Wilkerson: Well, there was definitely a language barrier, the cultural barrier. You know what I mean? I mean, you know, I couldn't speak a lick Spanish, you know, other than adios, amigo and what not and everything. But you had a couple of, there was a shop stewardess there or she was like a second command. Her name was Maria. She spoke English also. So she was like the cultural and the language bridge with the non-Spanish and English speaking employees.

Q: Were there any whites who did work in the shipping department?

Wilkerson: No. There was even a black shipping supervisor, older guy.

Q: How were you treated by your supervisor?

Wilkerson: Okay. All right. I mean, they all knew I was going to college and everything, and it was like, wow, man. Hey go out there and make something out of yourself and everything. You know what I mean? So, you know, there are people that were really pulling for me and everything, and, you know, I didn't, I guess I acted like any typical seventeen year old high school graduate. You know, I was fickle. I did stupid stuff. You know, I pissed one guy off because I left an order of shirts on the platform, the truck had pulled away, but he got blamed for.

Q: He got blamed for it. You didn't clarify it, Owen?

Wilkerson: I can't, you know, I mean, the boss called him in. You know what I mean? Oh yeah. Yeah. I think it was to this effect. Yeah, yeah. Well, you know, he's the new man and what not and everything, but you're responsible. You've been here for three or four years. You know the system. That type of.

Q: Was there a union on the job?

Wilkerson: No.

Q: What was your next job after the job at Cooper's in Newark?

Wilkerson: The Christmas I was home in 62 worked in a post office. That was fun. Nice big check. We didn't get the check until after like in January, after I was back in college. You know what I mean. But it was big fun. And that took care of almost a semester's tuition. But it was fun. I mean, you know, we would go to work all types of hours and everything. And, I mean, there would be kids from Morgan and, you know, I mean, we just had great fun. They were glad

to see us go after the holidays.

Q: Did you ever do any part time work in between your full time jobs?

Wilkerson: No. They were all full time jobs.

Q: Were you ever unemployed?

Wilkerson: Yeah. After the newspaper closed up, after the Newark News folded, I was unemployed about for six or seven months until Encore Magazine established itself and then I worked for Encore. I stood in line with the guys from Ballantine because at that particular time, it was the 1970s, 71, Ballantine had just got out of business. You know, and I stood in line with the Ballantine guys from the brewery. And, I mean, I was so glad to get back to work and everything so I didn't even pick up my last check.

Q: You said you stood in line with the Ballantine people. That was at the unemployment office?

Wilkerson: Yes. Yeah. And I didn't even pick up my unemployment check. The last one that was due to me. I was just so glad to get back to work.

Q: Maybe they still owe you.

Wilkerson: Well, I don't want it now. It was just a humiliating experience, you know, to go down there and every week and hear the same thing, the same questions. Are you looking for a job? Yes. Who are you looking for? And then the people start hollering at you and everything. You feel so humiliated.

Q: I've been there and done that.

Wilkerson: So when I found out that, you know, I had the job with Encore Magazine as executive editor after having gone for interviews and everything, I had one more check to get. You know, we were down there on Broadway. I told myself the hell with the check.

Q: Where was Encore located at that time?

Wilkerson: 520 Madison Avenue in New York City.

Q: In New York. I see. What were the common occupations for black men and women in Newark during your years that you grew up here?

Wilkerson: Laborers, factory workers. You had inklings of city employees. The city hired, well, particularly Councilman Turner, who was councilman of the Central Ward, Irving I. Turner. He played an instrumental role in seeing to it that a lot of African-Americans were hired in government. City government and what not. And there were predominantly African-American teachers at Charlton Street School. That's when I first ran into Harry Wheeler who later ran for president, I mean mayor, for the City of Newark against Ken. But Harry was like a disciplinarian. You know, when there was a problem, Harry would come up and get you and rough you up. Did you know Harry Wheeler?

Q: Yes I did. I didn't know him that well, but I knew him.

Wilkerson: Slick Harry. He stole the kids milk money. [Laughter]

Q: That was his claim to fame.

Wilkerson: But he worked in Ken's first administration.

Q: Yes. I know. That's where I knew him.

Wilkerson: And very, I think he worked with Moet or what not. But Harry, you know, I learned a lot from Harry. Cause I used to sit over at the Bridge Club with him, and I was just getting into journalism, and Harry would start spewing out all these big words. And I used to say, how do you spell that. Just two fold purposes. To learn some new words, and number one, see whether he was legit. Cause, you know, Harry talked a lot of stuff also. But, no, he was all right. You know what I mean? And he was an interesting guy. He was before his time. He was a strategist, a manipulator and he was a bright guy.

Q: When and how did employment opportunities for blacks in Newark change over the years?

Wilkerson: I would say, and I don't want to use 1967 as the base, because there were blacks employed prior to the riots or that chaotic month. When I was in the school system, when I first went into the school system in 65, you had a gentleman by the name of Duke Brown, Robert L. Brown, who was director of personnel downtown. Duke was formerly track, no football coach at Central. And so I could just speak for the educational system. I knew a lot of blacks went through the educational system. And Duke was from North Carolina. He went to one of the schools in North Carolina. And if you were from any of the schools in North Carolina, you know, it was like it was an unwritten rule that you got carte blanche. You went to A&T or Shaw or what not and everything. But I didn't look at, you know, I don't know whether blacks or working at Bamberger's or any of these department stores, or whether there was penetration within the corporate America. Bell Tel or Mutual Benefit or Prudential. I just saw it within the education system. At that particular time, the system was already predominantly, the students were predominantly black students anyway.

Q: Do you belong to a church in Newark?

Wilkerson: No. I try to make all the churches. I go to Zion Hill once in a while. I go to St. Luke's Episcopal Church in Montclair. I try to visit various churches. I've gone to a Buddhist temple and everything. Not that I'm trying to identify who I am or what I want to go to, but, you

know, being very honest with you, Mrs. Brickus, I feel just at home as picking up the Bible and reading it at home than going to church. You know, not that I'm arrogant or obnoxious as to saying why should I go listen to this minister tell his congregation what to do or what not to do. You know, maybe if I were not an educated person, I would fall into that trap. But, you know, my argument is well, why should I go hear this man, even if he is speaking so eloquently about something that I already know about.

Q: So you never held a membership in a church in?

Wilkerson: Zion Hill Baptist Church.

Q: Oh, you were a member of Zion Hill?

Wilkerson: Yeah.

Q: How long were you a member there?

Wilkerson: Oh, God, I was a member of Zion Hill until that incident where Milton and his girlfriend were expelled from the church. And then I had a sheer disdain for the church, and, you know, I had gone, I was in college then and what not and all of that. You know, and my mother was an ardent member and everything, and we had several debates as to, you know, whether it was right or wrong. She believed it was right that they be expelled, and I believed that it was wrong. So, you know, after graduating from college, you know, I would go in deference to her and everything and what not. You know, and then we would debate. I would say, gee whiz, Mom, why do listen to this nonsense and everything and what not and all. So, you know.

Q: Is your mother still living?

Wilkerson: No. She's deceased. She died in 72.

Q: I see. When you were a member of Zion Hill, did you hold any offices or what kind, or how active were you in the church?

Wilkerson: I sang in the choir. Member of the Sunday School. No offices.

Q: Are you familiar with the history of Zion Hill?

Wilkerson: Yeah. That was founded in the City of Newark. Reverend Pullen. I did know its history, but I can't recollect it now. But it's one of the oldest Baptist Churches that exist in the City of Newark.

Q: Do you remember or have recollection of any minister or officer or member of the church that you might consider as having been outstanding?

Wilkerson: Yeah. Reverend John R. Stanford. He's the pastor now. Reverend Stanford.

Q: Stanford, he's an old man now. Isn't he.

Wilkerson: I guess he is.

Q: About how old is he?

Wilkerson: I don't know. But he's still alive.

Q: I know.

Wilkerson: Yeah. I still see him on the streets and what not.

Q: And he's still pastoring?

Wilkerson: Yeah.

Q: How much have you participated in social and cultural activities in Newark?

Wilkerson: I was formerly chairman of the board of the Newhart School which is located on Central Avenue. That was an alternative type school for youth offenders. That was an alternative to the youth house. I was formerly with the JC's. Very active in scouting. On the community district council, Essex Council, of the Boy Scouts of America. What else? That's it I can recollect. In 78 I was voted in Who's Who among black Americans. 79 I was voted in Marquis Who's Who in industry and finance. I got several fellowships to different universities and what not.

Q: What do you consider to have been the major accomplishments of Zion Hill as well as those social and cultural activities that we just talked about?

Wilkerson: The major accomplishments of the Zion Hill, according to me?

Q: No, the major accomplishments as a community institution. What good has it done?

Wilkerson: Oh, okay. Again, back in those days, I don't want to sound too ancient, but the church was indeed a catalyst. Tremendous catalyst. You know, notwithstanding the pettiness and what not and everything. You know, and the insecure individuals that you would meet and everything. If you got beyond them, it was an institution that was much needed. You know. Whether you believe in fire and brimstone or not and everything, it gave you some sort of salvation and what not, and it kept you in check that if there were any distractions within your life and what not, you can always relate back to the church and relate to some aspects of what it taught and what not and everything. It was a great catalyst. And I still today, I still say that the black church is still a catalyst within African-American society. But again, and this is my personal belief, is that the church has to change also to the norms of present day African-American society and not African-American society of the 1940s.

Q: What about the social and cultural organizations that you belong to? What do you think were their major accomplishments?

Wilkerson: Well, some of them, I'm a member of Alpha Phi Omega Fraternity, the national service fraternity. And their main thing was service. You know, doing volunteer work. They still exist. I think that that's a benefit. You know what I mean? To society and everything. They're doing, they're performing service, you know, to various communities and what not. Tutorial programs and what not. After school programs, scholarship funding and what not.

Q: How much have you participated in political activities in Newark?

Wilkerson: Political activities, I was formerly press secretary to former Newark councilman Ralph T. Grant when he ran for Senate against Donald Payne. And I was an aide to former Assemblyman Eugene Thompson. And I ran a couple of political campaigns, behind the scenes campaigns for councilman Grant.

Q: Okay. How much have you participated in general community activities in Newark, and what community organizations, for example, neighborhood organizations, civic organizations and that kind of thing?

Wilkerson: Civic organizations, at this time, no. None whatsoever. Due to my employ with the City administration. You know, I'm in a very strategic and interesting office. I work for the office of the City Clerk. And that is neutral. That's. We cannot get involved in any political campaigns or belong to any civic associations or what not and everything because the clerk is the neutral body that tallies the votes and what not.

Q: Aside from being a consumer of regular goods and services, in what ways have you participated in the economic life of the community?

Wilkerson: Well, I shop in Newark. I buy in Newark. I give to various organizations, you know, and I look upon them as tax write offs. But I'm being very pragmatic about it. I give to the Boys and Girls Clubs, various youth organizations and everything. You know, it's not like thousands and thousands of dollars or anything. But there's an interesting organization called Newark Alumni which I'm proud to be a member of. One of the founding members along with several other people. And Newark Alumni is a gathering of all people who've attended the high school in Newark. Even if you've attended a day. You know, public high school or private high schools. And Newark Alumni is doing some interesting things within the community as far as doing credit counseling services and everything to people who are bad debt with banks and what not.

Q: Did you ever own or operate your own business?

Wilkerson: I tried opening, doing something in the area of public relations in 1988, after my tenure as special assistant to Dr. Younger at Essex County College, and I thought I knew the business world and what not and everything, but I was somewhat ill prepared and everything. Not necessarily expertise and everything because I had a cadre of people, former business people and business people directing me and guiding me. But it was just the idea of, I didn't have capital and everything. So I really couldn't keep the business going as I wanted to. But it was in the area of public relations.

Q: Did you ever buy stock in any black owned businesses?

Wilkerson: No. But I'm seriously, I'm reading Earl Grey's book now, and what not and everything, and I seriously want to start investing in, you know, several black owned companies that he's recommended in his book.

Q: What is the title of Earl Grey's book and who is Earl Grey?

Wilkerson: Earl Grey is the editor and publisher of Black Enterprise Magazine. You've never

heard of him?

Q: No. I used to subscribe to Black Enterprise, but I did not know who the publisher was.

Wilkerson: Yeah. Yeah. That's Earl Grey. Right. And his book is titled, if I can recollect, How to Make Black Money the White Way. But Earl has been out there and what not and everything. I've always had a penchant not just investing in black owned companies, but just being an investor in companies per se. Particularly, not necessarily in stocks, but in dividend reinvestments. Particularly dealing with no load mutual funds where you don't have to pay the commission and everything. But what I would love to do, and probably starting this year and what not, and during my years of retirement and what not, I would just like to start investing in companies and what not, and become a major player in the overall say, in the overall operations of the company.

Q: As you grew up, as far back as you can remember, how did the black community get information on the news and events of the community? Was it through reading black newspapers or listening to black radio or?

Wilkerson: Well, when I was growing up you had WNJR on radio. And you had Anna [?], she would do the gospel thing. Clinton Miller.

Q: Every Sunday morning, Anna [?].

Wilkerson: Yeah. Yeah. But, you know, come to think of it, there were no black talk shows dealing with issues. You know, you could listen to. I don't even think Reverend Ike was in existence. No, Reverend Ike wasn't around. Clinton Miller, he would do the rhythm and blues think and all. But the Afro and New Jersey Daily Herald I think were the black papers. Then there was always that connection, you know, within the various clubs that I talked about. You know, the Alabama Club and what not where somebody would go down to Alabama and what not, and they would bring news back and what not and all. And then there was a regular.

END SIDE TWO, TAPE THREE; BEGIN SIDE ONE, TAPE FOUR

Q: Mr. Wilkerson, we had just talked about how the black community received information on the news and events that happened in the black community. And we had talked about the availability of black newspaper, black radio, etc. Our next question is what was the relationship between black Newark and other black communities in New Jersey?

Wilkerson: Growing up in the City of Newark, we knew of several African-American communities. I imagine you're talking about cities, predominantly African-American cities?

Q: Right.

Wilkerson: At that particular time, Newark was more or less an island, and I would say an island because we were surrounded by other cities that were predominantly white. We had Irvington. I can't recollect of any black families living in Irvington, or shall I say a predominantly black or African-American enclave in Irvington during the early 50s. You had a very upward mobile, upper middle class black enclave in East Orange. There are blacks in Montclair, I remember. There are blacks in Plainfield. But those cities were cities that, shall I say, they were a little, quote, unquote, better off than Newark. This is my perception. These were, you know, this is where your black intelligencia lived. You doctors, your lawyers and what not. Although there were, as I mentioned, Dr. McCarroll and there were doctors in our community and neighborhoods also. We had, although the interesting thing about it is that during Sundays you would have individuals from all black communities congregating under the church umbrella. Singing in the choir at Zion Hill Baptist Church, they would be singing festivals and Lawrence Roberts, the Reverend Lawrence Roberts was the organist there and what not. And we would go on tours to churches, you know, surrounding towns and communities and what not. And that was the influx where you saw all the blacks of all sorts of economic and social means coming together. But I can't remember whether there was any linkage of blacks in other towns with blacks in Newark, other than, you know, the church.

Q: So did you have any, did you ever visit any of these communities for other than church related?

Wilkerson: Yes. We used to go to parties in Montclair. And at that particular time, Mrs. Brickus, oh boy, Montclair had had some of the most beautiful young women. And they were the Howard University types and the Morgan State College types and what not and all. And their parents were very protective of them. And they found out that one of their daughters was dating someone from Newark, that relationship would be dissolved immediately. I used to date a young lady who lived in East Orange, and I remember once in a while when I would go visit her and everything, you know, the police would always stop me if I'm walking along the streets of East Orange. This was back in 56, 57, 58. You know, ask me did I live in the area and where was I headed and everything. You know, and I told them I lived in Newark and what not. And immediately they would say would you get in the car with us, and they would take me to the Newark border and I was able to catch, you know, a bus on Central Avenue and go back to Newark. But at that particular time, you know, if you were from Newark, you were looked upon rather suspect. You know, not even by the parents of these young ladies, but, you know, you're in competition with the guys that lived in these particular towns because, you know, you were, quote, unquote, invading their turf and what not. And they'd heard so many negative stories about people living in Newark, and what not, and what Newark was about and what not and everything. But, yes, we visited these towns and what not and all. And it was mainly for social purposes.

Q: Do you remember any outstanding blacks coming into Newark, such as maybe politicians or ministers or orators or entertainers? You ever meet any of those persons?

Wilkerson: Oh yes. Growing up in Newark's Central Ward and what not, there was Irving I. Turner, and naturally he was the Central Ward's councilman, the councilman for the Central Ward. And he was Newark's first black elected official. He was a great individual. He lived on High Street I remember. As a matter of fact, I think he lived right down the street from the old Krueger Mansion. And he was just a phenomenal person and everyone looked up to him. He

would walk the streets. And the thing about it is he's not like the politicians of today that you only see during election time. He would walk the streets. You know what I mean? Remember he smoked cigars. And he would pull up at the corner store, cigar store, on Avon and Hillside and come out with. I think either he smoked White Owls or El Productos. But, anyway, he was that type of individual. I mean, you know, very powerful man back at that time. I mean, all your job patronage and party patronage had to go through him. If you wanted a job downtown, not necessarily in government, but at one of the stores or what not, Irving Turner was the individual you would go talk with and sit down and talk with. You could always sit and talk with him. You had prominent people, there was Jess Tate. He didn't live in my neighborhood, but he lived in the Central Ward. You had Dr. Year. Dr. McCarroll. Interestingly, you had Red Fox. Red Fox lived on my street. Matter of fact, there were these two charming, beautiful ladies, their last name Killobrough. And their father, the Killobrough brothers were in, they were involved in home maintenance. They had a painting business and what not. And Red Fox came through town and married one of the Killobrough sisters. They were twins. And right on Hillside Avenue, in Newark, New Jersey, Red Fox and, you know, Red would do the nightclubs and what not. He had just come from, I think, from St. Louis. And, you know, then there was this guy, I can't remember. Oh yeah, Tommie Tucker. Tommie Tucker wrote the song Put on Your High Heel Sneakers. And Tommie Tucker lived on Hillside Place, on our street. During my shoe shining days, I would hit the clubs and everything on West Street, a lot of the jazz clubs on West Street and everything. And I remember meeting Sarah Vaughn. Who else? My mother used to go to a club called the Picadilly Club, and she used to, you know, come back and say, hey, you know, I saw this person, that person. But there were some famous people. There was Daddy Grace. I remember Daddy on Springfield Avenue, right across the street from the Essex Theater, the old Essex Theater. Daddy Grace had a church. I guess you want to call it a church and everything, but they would have revivals and everything and what not. And, you know, on Sundays, not every Sunday, but on particular Sundays, you know, Daddy Grace would be in town and what not, and they would have the cars lined up and everything. And the interesting thing about it is, I guess this is, you know, this was really, you look at the whole feminist movement now, and then I look at my mother as well as a lot of other women who raised their families successfully without the male in

the home. Daddy Grace was always surrounded by these women, and these women always wore white dresses. You know. And they all drove his cars and what not. They were like his, I guess, secret service. Because you never saw any men around him. And these women would get in these big, black Cadillacs. I mean, you know, and they were like the secret service with him. But, yeah, Daddy Grace was one individual. You had Don Newcomb. Don Newcomb had a bar on Jones Street. Jones Street. Right near Springfield Avenue and Jones Street. Right across from the old Jones Street Y. And there were players on the Newark Bears. I never personally met Jackie Robinson, but I used to hear my uncles and all talk about, you know, how they went to a Newark Bears game. Newark Bears or Newark Eagles? I think it was the Newark Eagles. But they saw Jackie Robinson and what not, Roy Campanella.

Q: Jackie used to come into Newark?

Wilkerson: Well my uncles would state because he was playing ball. I think he played for the old Newark Eagles in the Negro League. But I never personally, you know, met Jackie Robinson. But they would come home after games and talk about how they met Jackie Robinson. I remember my uncle had an autographed ball that Jackie Robinson gave him and what not. And he was called in, my uncle was called to Korea during the Korean conflict and everything, and he took the ball with him over there and everything. You know, he lost the ball. He claims someone probably stole it from him. Probably did, because at that particular time, among the black servicemen in Korea, you know, the name of Jackie Robinson was of great significance.

Q: Do you remember when black folk were first hired on the police force and as firefighters and social workers in Newark?

Wilkerson: No. I don't. I remember we all had, within the Central Ward, we had this one black policeman named Slim. And I remember he was a tall, dark skinned guy. A no nonsense individual. I would say he was, he terrorized people, but you knew of his presence. You know, there in the ward and everything. I remember he, they claim, I remember, you know, grown ups

and my mother mentioning that he was, you know, quick on the trigger and what not and everything. There were rumors that he would walk into a bar and beat someone or what not and everything. But I remember there was a social worker named Mr. Grey. And I vaguely knew of him. But he was a real good friend of the principal or vice principal of Charlton Street School at that time, and his name was Lawston Gaeta. And Mr. Gaeta was our scoutmaster. Boy Scout Troop 113. And we would see Mr. Grey. He was a very easy going individual. He was a social worker, and he would visit several of the families, you know, within the neighborhood and what not. I remember he was from Howard University. Again, you know, he would talk to us about going to college and doing well in high school and grammar school, getting good grades and what not and all. And at that particular time, the prominent educated professional blacks that we ran into were from such schools as Howard, Wilberforce University out in Ohio. But I can't remember when I saw my first black fireman.

Q: Okay. When and if you or others in your neighborhood got into trouble or needed help to solve a problem, to whom in Newark did they turn? Why and how effective were they in helping persons in trouble?

Wilkerson: Well, interesting thing about it, you know, we, you mean us, or families?

Q: Anyone in Newark who might have gotten into any kind of trouble, whether it was trouble with the law and they needed to prove their innocence, or whether it was because of some disaster, maybe fire or death in the family. And people got a problem that they couldn't handle on their own.

Wilkerson: Well, there was the, in various communities and all, you know, I surmise that there was the minister. Then there was Irving Turner. You know, people would go to Councilman Turner if they felt that they were being denied adequate housing and what not and everything. Or if someone lived in a cold water flat, and the landlord would never fix it and what not. You know what I mean. You would go to Irving Turner for those complaints and what not. As far as trouble

was concerned, the old Third Ward precinct was right around the corner on Seventeenth Avenue. At that time, it was called the First Precinct, I think. But, you know, the trouble situation was handled by, you know, your parents and by the family members and the extended family. If you got into trouble, you know, your mother or father would deal with it. But growing up, we never got so out of hand that the law had to intercede.

Q: I see. How was black Newark perceived, especially by outsiders? Was the community seen as a slum? Where black folk lived in Newark was it generally perceived as being a slum?

Wilkerson: Well, at that particular, when I was growing up and what not, Newark was perceived as a highly industrialized city. The downtown section, I mean, you had something like, at one time, you had like twenty some theaters in Newark, different dance halls and what not and everything. You had, you know, in the Third Ward you had all your nightclubs and what not and everything. And I would say that Newark was perceived. You had factories. You know, people worked and what not. True there was unemployment and everything, but you had a lot of factories in the old Third Ward. You had factories in Newark and what not. I guess they perceived the City of Newark as any other post war, you know, industrialized city. You know, during 1948, 49, 50, 51. True there were cold water flats and what not, and there are kids that were not as fortunate as I was and what not and all, but again, you had that extended family and that humane situation of giving a family a pair of pants that you no longer could wear or some shoes and what not. And, you know, we looked upon ourselves, you know, as proud people and what not. Now how people looked at us, we couldn't fathom that.

Q: I see. Did all classes of African-Americans live in the same community? For instance, like the uneducated or undereducated and the professional people and all of those in between. Did they live in the same community?

Wilkerson: Oh yeah. At that particular time, yeah. I mean, I'm sure you had people like Dr. Dawson. There was a Dr. Dawson. And he and his family lived up on South Thirteenth or South

Twelfth Street and everything. But Dr. Dawson knew his roots were back in the Central Ward and what not, and Dr. Dawson would come back in the Central Ward and everything. Because at that particular time, the individuals like Dr. Dawson and Dr. Year and Dr. McCarroll, they didn't have white clients. So they made their monies, you know, by serving us.

Q: How did all of those classes of persons get along with each other?

Wilkerson: It was okay. I mean, it was great. It was fantastic. I think the relationships could have been, you know, I imagine there were personal differences and everything. You know, I didn't like you because you were a Jehovah Witness and this and that, or you thought that you were this and that and what not, you know. But again, we were talking about segregation prevailed, was still prevalent then. And as I mentioned, that kept, that kept a lot of your black or African-American communities in tact. Whether you lived across the street from a minister or whether you lived next door to a doctor or a dentist or school teacher, you know, no one looked down upon one another. We all embraced one another and got along. Really.

Q: Other than white store owners and other whites with a vested economic interest, do you recall any other whites having an interest in the black community?

Wilkerson: I personally can't. I mean, you know, I think I mentioned earlier about the Jewish merchants. They were astute enough to realize that if they were in a black community, they had to hire some blacks and what not and everything. And they did. You know what I mean? I don't know how much they paid them and everything, but, you know, the presence of a black person behind the counter and what not from the merchant's perspective helps him tremendously. Because, you know, and there were forces within the community. And when I use the forces, I'm using that in a positive way. There were forces like the NAACP and community minded people who would have brought that to the attention of that particular merchant who did not hire blacks and what not. And then plus there was Irving I. Turner, councilman Turner, and he would make his, he would make it well known to a particular white vendor who refused to hire blacks that, you

know, well, gee whiz, you know, you're in a black community and what not, and this is how you make your money. But I would say that from the humane elements and what not, or the, quote, unquote, liberal perspective, I couldn't venture to tell you whether they were really concerned about our community or not. I would lean toward their being concerned only due to economic reasons, economic advances.

Q: Did your family or persons, African-Americans who lived in your community, did they shop downtown Newark?

Wilkerson: Yes and no. You had stores such as Bamberger's, Kresge's, Ohrbach's, Hanes, which we couldn't go into back then. But, you know, there were various occasions, you know, Christmas and what not and everything, Thanksgiving. The Thanksgiving Day Parade was held, and Bamberger's had a Thanksgiving Day Parade in Newark and what not. But, you know, you could really shop within your own neighborhood. I had mentioned early, all along Prince Street, you know, you had Rigley's Bakery. You wanted paint, you would get paint from Joseph Riccardi on Spruce Street. You had just as many restaurants and nightclubs and stores and what not within the community that you very seldom shopped downtown and everything. Plus the prices were so outrageous downtown and everything. Downtown, we looked upon downtown as a place, you know, specifically for entertainment. Or you go downtown to the Schraft's down there. A Schraft's ice cream or candy shop. And I remember blacks couldn't go in there at one time and everything, but that changed, and what not and all. Downtown was, you know, Christmas. They had Wideaway Ballroom, the Terrace Ballroom and other dance clubs downtown. But the portion, the majority of our spending power was within our community.

Q: What do you consider to have been the best stores in Newark?

Wilkerson: Best as far as?

Q: Quality and quantity.

Wilkerson: I would say that Bamberger's was the, and this is just my personal opinion. Bamberger's was the store. You bought something from Bamberger's and that was the store. I mean, you walk into Bamberger's, I never forget, you know, you walked into Bamberger's and they had like, oh God, eight inch thick carpets. You know, you'd just sink on the floor. You know, I'll never forget. Those carpets were red. You know. And I mean the store, an elegant store. S. Klein's was several notches below Bamberger's. Ohrbach's several notches below Bamberger's. Bamberger's was the store. I mean, since we couldn't go into Hanes or we didn't, you know, many black people didn't frequent Hanes, Bamberger's was the store.

Q: Do you recall any specific incidents of racial discrimination in which you were involved or you experienced?

Wilkerson: No. Only one time I remember I was in Bamberger's, and I used to like these little toy soldiers and what not, and I think they were like ten cents. Iron soldiers. And, you know, this one particular white clerk, female clerk, you know, it just took her a long time, you know, in getting around to me and everything. I don't know if she ignored me or she thought I was just a kid marveling at the toys in the showcase and what not. But I remember she somewhat berated me and everything and all, but she took my money and she gave me the toys. That's the only thing I can recollect. I remember heroes late, and when I say heroes late, I'm talking about the 70s. I was on my way to work one day, and at that time I was in the corporate sector working in New York and I was walking across Raymond Blvd. And I don't know whether I was walking too slow or she was driving too fast, but she almost hit me. And I said something to her, watch where you're going and everything. And, you know, this was a white lady, and she rolled down the window and called me nigger. You know. And I gave her the bird. And she proceeded to go about her business, and I proceeded to go about my business. I remember in the mid-80s, I had an encounter with a drunken white business executive. You know, evidently he had had too much to drink and everything, just did some racial slurs and what not and everything. And there were several other black, younger black guys there, and they were about to put him in his white place, as you might say. You know, I went over and told them, you know, told them, I said, look, first of all he might

accuse you, you know, he's going to accuse you of assault and battery and then you have a police record and what not. He's in his liquor and everything and what not. If that's the way he feels about black people, you know, he was calling, using the word nigger and black people all are on welfare and what not and everything. You know. So I stressed upon the three guys, you know, I stressed upon them just ignore and what not and everything. So we all just walked away from it. But they were about to attack him physically. You know, he was calling us all these names. And I guess, you know, I had heard the name nigger before. It didn't bother me. But these were younger guys and what not and everything, and their whole thinking was how dare you call me nigger in Newark. In my hometown, in my yard. You know what I mean? My backyard, you know, in a predominantly African-American city. You know, I told them it's not worth it. I said, you'll just be stooping to his level.

Q: Do you remember where that incident took place in Newark?

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Q: Do you remember who was referred to as the Mayor of Springfield Avenue?

Wilkerson: The Mayor of Springfield Avenue, golly.

Q: And African-American person was referred to as the Mayor of Springfield Avenue.

Wilkerson: I'm trying to think who you had. What businesses, African-American businesses you had on Springfield. I know when I was growing up you had the Bethune Savings and Loan, it was a bank. And then that went under.

Q: Where was that located? Right at that intersection of Springfield Avenue and --

Wilkerson: And Jones Avenue. Yeah. Yeah.

Q: I remember.

Wilkerson: And right down the street, there was an ice cream place. They sold ice cream. Good ice cream. Then further down, I think you had H&L Green store. But I can't remember who the Mayor of Springfield Avenue was.

Q: Someone mentioned to me a person by the name of I believe it was Hogan Jenkins that had a record shop up on.

Wilkerson: Oh Jenkins Holman. Yeah. Okay.

Q: He had a record shop on Springfield Avenue.

Wilkerson: Yeah. Come to think of it, yeah. He had gospel. Yeah. Right. You know, okay, yeah. Okay, I'd forgotten about that. Right. Clint Miller used to always advertise. I can't remember the name of the record place, but Clint Miller used to do, what you call them. Clint Miller would always appear at the store and what not to promote the business and everything.

Q: Who was Clint Miller?

Wilkerson: Clint Miller was on WNJR. Clint Miller was a rhythm and blues radio announcer and music host. WNJR radio. And Jenkins Holman.

Q: Do you remember such local personalities as William Ashby, Meyer Ellingstein, who was Newark's first Jewish mayor, and Prosper Brewer, supposedly Newark's first black policeman, and you talked about Irving Turner. So those other persons like William Ashby and Meyer Ellingstein and Prosper Brewer, do you remember any of those?

Wilkerson: My aunt did domestic work for Meyer Ellingstein. And he was very instrumental in

getting her into the Douglas Harrison apartments. Back then Douglas Harrison apartments, they were owned by Prudential Insurance Company, and the only blacks that resided there were your, quote, unquote, upwardly mobile blacks. Doctors, teachers, politicians and what not and everything. And she used to always talk about Meyer Ellingstein. I, she said to this day that I met him, but I can't remember, you know, meeting him. I mean, I was like five or six or seven when she did domestic work for him. He was the last mayor under the old charter of city, what do you call it, the council type government. You know, where every four years you go around the table. He wasn't an elected official mayor.

Q: I see. I see.

Wilkerson: Prosper Brewer. I've heard of that. I've heard people talk about him. But the only policemen I remember was this guy Slim. Ashby, I couldn't recollect whether I'd met him or not. I've heard of him. You know, Harold Ashby.

Q: No. Not Harold Ashby. Harold Ashby was a guy who was involved with the Newark Board of Education who had the confrontation between himself and Callahan becoming whether it's secretary for the Board of Education. There was some conflict between Callahan and Harold Ashby. But this was William Ashby who was supposedly the founder, one of the founders of the Urban League.

Wilkerson: Urban League. No, I don't remember.

Q: What do you remember regarding black institutions, like hospitals, hotels and banks in Newark, and where were they located?

Wilkerson: You had City Hospital which later became Harrison Markum Center.

Q: But that was not black owned.

Wilkerson: Okay. Okay. You had Bethune Savings and Loan. I had mentioned them. That was a bank on Belmont Avenue. On West Kinney Street you had Community Hospital. That was like a little three flight walk up. You had about thirteen or fourteen beds there. You had Community Hospital. Do I recollect that we had a hotel on Clinton Hotel.

Q: Right. Riviera.

Wilkerson: Riviera. Right. Right.

Q: Wasn't there a Coleman Hotel down someplace down?

Wilkerson: That's right. The Coleman brothers had their hotel on High Street. That was called the black gold coast because on High Street you have all your doctors. You have Doctor Vaco, the Coleman brothers had their hotel on High Street, you had, I'm trying to think whether Wighams was on High Street. I think Wighams was on High Street. But High Street was another interesting street. You had your old Krueger Mansion. Irving I. Turner lived on High Street. That was the street that had. I used to hear my mother refer to it as doctor's row because there were all types of doctors and dentists along High Street and what not. Yeah. You had the Coleman Hotel on High Street, the Coleman brothers right.

Q: How important do you think these institutions were to black Newark?

Wilkerson: Extremely important because it gave a lot of residents of the Central Ward a lot of pride that here were individuals of their skin color doing well, you know, economically. And we all patronized them. I can't remember going to a white doctor. I could, you know, back then, I don't know whether there were any hotels in the city that, you know, blacks could go to other than Father Devine's hotel and the Coleman brothers hotel. I couldn't remember any. You know, I don't know whether there was. The Hilton wasn't in town then. They claim that the Robert Treet Hotel, you know, but who knew of the Robert Treet Hotel. You know, that was all the way

downtown and what not. That's right the Coleman hotel. Question here Don Newcomb. Newcomb's bar on Jones and Springfield Avenue. That was a well-established business. You had the, you had other places like the Eureka Diner, a cafeteria some people referred to as the Eureka Diner, some referred to as the Eureka Cafeteria. Then you had Ma Stewart's place, Stewart's Restaurant. That was, I'd hear my aunt used to always say that Stewart Restaurant started on West Kinney Street. I don't know. I remember Mrs. Stewart's Restaurant on Prince Street, right next to the chicken, poultry market. And that's where I remember her restaurant.

Q: Now she didn't move over on what? Didn't she move from Prince Street --

Wilkerson: She moved up to Avon. She used to be, matter of fact she used to be on Avon Avenue, right across from the old telephone building. And then from Avon she moved onto --

Q: Lyons.

Wilkerson: Yeah. And Eureka, if I remember was on Prince Street. Not Prince Street. West Kinney. And then they moved, they moved to Wright Street for a while. In fact, if I could remember they were in a basement. Looked like you would go down the stairs and what not on Wright Street. Cause I used to get my hair cut early 60s at the barber on Wright Street. And then they moved on Bergen Street I think.

Q: What do you remember, what kind of music do you remember having heard in the black community as you grew up?

Wilkerson: Gospel and R&B and a little jazz. I mean, you know, you have Anna Tuwell coming on the radio on Sunday mornings and what not. And that's all she would play, gospel music. And having been a part of the church, the gospel. You had Five Line Boys. Majalia Jackson. The Clouds, the Mighty Clouds of Joy.

Q: Oh yeah.

Wilkerson: They were. Yeah, the Mighty Clouds of Joy. They were, between those guys and Five Line Boys, used to have a place in Newark called the Laurel Garden. And I think Laurel Garden was on Springfield Avenue.

Q: Right.

Wilkerson: They had boxing there. And this guy named Ronnie Williams. He was a big gospel.

Q: Promoter.

Wilkerson: Promoter. Yeah. And, you know, Ronnie Williams would have a show with the Five Line Boys or the Mighty Clouds of Joy on a Sunday or a Friday night, and they would pack Laurel Gardens. And then there was R&B. You had people, you know, my uncle, he enjoyed listening to Screaming Jay Hawkins. I Put a Spell on You. Cootie Williams Band was very popular. Count Basie. The Picadilly Club. And like I mentioned I used to shine shoes and everything, and I used to hit all these clubs and everything. And there was Shirley and Lee songs, [sings a tune as follows] Feel So Good, now that you're with you. Come let me hug you, come let me kiss you. Feel so good. You had jazz. But the jazz was the, the people, we looked upon the people that were into jazz were, we referred to them as the Bohemians and what not. And they were the so-called pseudo-sophisticated people. You know. I heard jazz. Charlie Parker and what not and everything. But at that particular time growing up, like ten, eleven, twelve, thirteen, you know, I was really into Rock and Roll and R&B. You know, Fats Domino. Then you had groups like the Five Satins that sang In the Still of the Night, and that was one of their great songs. We were more inclined to listen to groups like that. Because at that particular time, you know, we were in our pre-teens and we were getting bigger and what not and everything, looking toward dating and what not, and we would go to parties and what not. And those were the groups we listened to. The Coasters. Not, no white performers. We knew Elvis Presley was around and what not, but he

was corny to us. We would rather listen to Fats Domino, Muddy Waters or someone.

Q: What leisure time activities did you participate in as you grew up? Like sports or going to the movies and?

Wilkerson: Well, every Saturday, speaking of the movies, every Saturday, we'd go to the movies. It was either the National, the Essex or the Cameo, and then we would venture up to the Avon. The Avon was on, there was an Avon Avenue, near Clinton Avenue. Ironically, the Avon Theater was on Clinton Avenue. But that was Saturday. I mean, you know, thirty-five cents you could go to the Cameo which was on Elizabeth Avenue. And you can just watch movies, you know, cartoons, and shoot em ups, cowboy movies and what not until six or seven o'clock. And then the kids had to leave. And sometimes we were hiding in the bathroom and be able to stay maybe an extra hour or two or the usher would catch us, and he would throw us out and what not. The National Movie on Belmont Avenue that was right next to the Masonic Lodge. That was another movies that if you wanted to really see a good Frankenstein or good Dracula movie, you would go to the National. The National had those types of movies. As well as the Essex on Springfield Avenue, which was adjacent to Daddy Grace Church, temple. The Avon Movie, they showed mainly cartoons. And the Cameo, they showed westerns. You know, so you had a choice. You know, if you wanted to see the horror movies, it was the National or the Avon. I mean, the National or the Essex. And ironically those movies were, you know, our parents and the older adults frequented those movies also, but, you know, they frequented those movies on evenings. I'll never forget my mother going to see The Robe. I guess this was back in 53 or 52, Victor Mature, but The Robe was playing down at the Paramount, in downtown. You had all your top billed movies and what not downtown. You know. And I think that was the first time she had ever been in the Paramount. And she was saying, gee whiz, a whole another world walking into the Paramount as compared to walking into the National or the Essex. You know, watching a movie.

Q: The Paramount was located on Market Street, I think.

Wilkerson: Yeah.

Q: Just below Broad, going towards.

Wilkerson: Yeah. Right next to the old Newark News Building.

Q: Okay.

Wilkerson: Yeah. And the proctors was located on the other side of Broad Street going up towards the courthouse. Then you had on Branford Place, you had the Branford Theater and Adams. And you had a theater down towards, walking towards Hanes, Loews, the Loews. That was a swank theater also. The Loews.

Q: Did you play any sports as a young person?

Wilkerson: Yeah. We played stickball growing up on Hillside Place. We would all go to Ripple Field and play baseball and what not and all. In high school I ran track, in Weequake High School. And I leaned toward track. I was too thin to play football, and I guess too scared. At that particular time I valued my speed and everything. I wasn't a good hitter so the guys would say, okay, you pitch, you know. And sometimes I would run for guys. You know, after a guy got a hit. If a big chubby guy got a base hit or something like that, we would use me as the designated runner. At that time, you know, I was faster and what not. And like I said, I prided my athletic ability on my speed, and so naturally, I decided to run track in high school and I ran track in college.

Q: What do you remember about the Newark Eagles baseball team, and did you ever attend any of their games?

Wilkerson: No, I didn't. But like I mentioned earlier, my uncles and friends fathers and parents

and everything would go to those games. You know, they would come back, you know, talking about the teams and the players and what not. But I never did get a chance to go to any of those games.

Q: What do you recall regarding the, quote, unquote, seamy side of black Newark life?

Wilkerson: The seamy side. Well, like I said, you know, we were all under one umbrella. We all lived together. I mean, there were, I mean, I would be a fool to say that there were no houses of ill repute or gambling didn't take place or there were no black gangsters and everything. You have to remember this was back in the late 40s and early 50s, after World War II, people came back from the, men and women came back from the war. Defense plants had all shut down. And the country under Truman who opened a lot of doors for black people, particularly soldiers, along with, particularly with pressure from people like Thurgood Marshall and the NAACP. It was there, but you didn't see it. You know, we had this one guy on our block named Ronnie. And, you know, Ronnie started a baseball team called the Asiatics. And, you know, we didn't know what Ronnie. Ronnie would always stay clean. Meaning he would always have pointy shoes and silk shoes and what not. And he would buy all his clothes from Wolmuth, W O L M U T H. That was the store where the Burger King is located, adjacent to the old court house. That's where all the gangsters bought their clothes. You know, so, I mean, it was really interesting because during my shoe shining ventures, you know, if you really wanted to make some good money, you went out, you opened shop in the front of Wolmuth's and you can just watch all the gangsters coming in, and they would get out of their big shiny Oldsmobiles and Cadillacs and what not, and they'd walk into Wolmuth's with their ladies on their arms and what not and all.

Q: Were these white gangsters or black gangsters?

Wilkerson: Black gangsters. Yeah. Yeah. But for some reason we knew that it existed. I mean, you know, we knew there was, quote, unquote, reefer and what not, but that was for the, a different set of people or different class of people and everything. But interesting thing about it, is

that no matter what vices went on during a Friday night or Saturday night or what not, for some reason everybody would, and I'm not saying using this word facetiously, but everybody would repent. And the church would bring everybody together Sunday. You know, and what they did I guess they had to do because that's the only thing they knew how to do. If they, they meaning, you know, people who were mixed up in the shady side of the community. You know what I mean? I mean, I'm sure if they were doctors or lawyers and what not, they would have been as successful as those individuals who were doctors and lawyers or schoolteachers and everything. But they just, they didn't get their break or whatever, and they.

Q: They created their own.

Wilkerson: Yeah. You know, there was bootlegging. I used to hear, you know, older adults in the community talk about bootlegging and what not and everything. You know, but it was, I wouldn't say a way of life, but I remember two white policemen, you know, would come, there's a store on the corner of Avon and Hillside. And one policeman's name was Mike. I'll never forget that. You know, they played the numbers. You know. So, I mean, here are two policemen playing the numbers. So I mean, you know, but life was life. I like to, there's a movie out by Denzel Washington called Women in the Blue Dress. I think it's Woman, Devil in a Blue Dress. You see that movie and every time, and I have a video, and when I want to reflect on the Newark I grew up in, I usually watch that video. And I told my son on numerous occasions, we watched it together, that's the Newark that I grew up in. I mean, hard working people. I mean, sure. You know, people come home tired. You know, they'll turn up the radio and you'll hear Caldonia or, you know, and sure people on a Friday they would hit the bars and everything. And it was just good times and everything and what not. And Saturday nights were great. I mean, people went out and danced and partied and everything and what not. But there was still family there. Sundays would go to church and what not. And then there were people who didn't go to church, but I mean, you know, be ready to go to work Monday morning and meet the man.

Q: Given that there was a seamy side, do you think that those persons who engaged in those

activities made any positive contribution to the black community in Newark?

Wilkerson: I'm sure there were individuals. They had to, quote, unquote, hide their monies some way. I'm sure they gave in, gave back to the community. These individuals probably didn't make as much as the Jewish gangsters were doing over on the Weequake side or the Italian gangsters in the North Ward or North Newark and what not and everything, you know.

Q: How do you think these black gangsters were perceived by the general community?

Wilkerson: I mean, we didn't necessarily as kids and growing up, we didn't idolize them per se. I mean, you know, we saw them riding around in cars, beautiful cars and what not and everything, dressed sharp and what not and everything. And I remember a friend of mine, I can't remember this guy's name because they all had nicknames. I mean, you never knew anybody's name as Richard Smith or, they had nicknames like Chops or Liverwurst or, you know. And I remember we were shining shoes one day on, in the front of Grants, which was next to the Paramount. And this one kid said, you know, I want to be just like you. One of the so-called gangsters. You could always tell, you could tell that they were people of a different ilk than your hard, average working people. I mean, you know, hats, big hats cocked on the side. And I remember him telling one of the gangsters, hey, Mr., I want to be just like you. And he told him, he told my friend, and I was there also, he said, you better not be like me. You grow up to be somebody. You grow up to be a doctor or lawyer or what not. And, you know, I mean, there was a strange look on both of our faces. You know, I mean, we were saying, well, gee whiz, you know, why can't we be like him. You know what I mean? But we didn't know this, but at that particular time, you know, he looked upon our innocence. And I guess he looked upon that statement as being, you know, an innocent statement and what not and everything. But he said, hey, you know, you don't grow up to be like me. You go to school and get a good education, son, and what not. You know what I mean? You grow up to be something for your people. You know what I mean?

Q: That was rather noble of him and rather perceptive.

Wilkerson: Well, you know, I think, Mrs. Brickus, the people, you know, that lived the shady, had the shady ilk, they were compassionate. They had a lot of compassion for us. They had a lot of compassion for the community. And I think they were a little embarrassed and a little ashamed also. You know what I mean? But that was their way of live. That was the way those chose to be. And it was an unwritten rule that if you sold reefer, you didn't give the reefer to kids. Unlike today. You know, it was an unwritten rule that you had respect for elderly people. You know. You had respect for women, and, you know, like I said, they stood out in the community. The red suits and the, I mean, you knew who they were. But you could always, if an individual of this particular ilk walked into Eureka Restaurant or Mrs. Stewart's Restaurant and everything, you could ask them, well, excuse me Mr. can you give me a dollar or something of this nature. They would give it to you. Now this could have been their self-gratification of, hey, I'm giving back to, quote, unquote, to the community. But, you know, we knew that they existed, but they never, you know, the guys that were involved in the reefer business or selling reefer and everything, they never, they never, quote, unquote, pinched young kids and everything.

Q: I see. What do you remember regarding public education in Newark and who well academically did black students seem to perform?

END SIDE TWO, TAPE FOUR; BEGIN SIDE ONE, TAPE FIVE

Q: Mr. Wilkerson, we were talking about the quality of education in the City of Newark as you grew up, but I want to go back to something that we had mentioned before about entertainment, the kinds of entertainment that existed in Newark. And you mentioned about some special establishments down in Frelinghuysen Avenue. Would you tell me more about that?

Wilkerson: Yes. I apologize for not including them. When I was growing up along Frelinghuysen Avenue, you had a white southern enclave around VanderPool Street and all along Sears Roebuck and the Sears Roebuck area of white southerners. And they lived there. I never ventured down that way, but I remember on I think it was Sundays on radio. I don't know whether it was WNJR

or what, on radio they had a country and western program, a musical program that I used to listen to. And that was my first introduction to country and western. To Hank Williams, Smokey Mountain Boys or the Smokey Ridge Boys or what not. But anyway, there was a bar on VanderPool Street, and they would broadcast country and western music, and I used to listen to a lot of country and western music. And when I would visit relatives in Virginia and North Carolina, I remember when I was about ten, eleven, twelve, you know, listening to country and western stations also. Why I used to listen to country and western music, I don't know at that point. I used to just like the lyrics. They're always sad lyrics, you know, my baby left me, or I'm just a working man and trying to make it in the world and everything. But I enjoyed listening to country and western music, and I know that sounds rather strange to hear that an urbanized African-American listening to country and western music, but I enjoyed listening to country and western music when I was growing up.

Q: I see. Now back to the quality of education in Newark. I believe I had asked you how well academically did you think black students seemed to perform in school. And my next question was how were black students treated by white teachers and white students in the Newark schools?

Wilkerson: Well, I can only relate to my experience. There was, at Charlton Street School which I attended and was graduated from, we for some reason, the white teachers, I remember teachers like Mr. Blasi, Mr. Velasci, Miss Diamond, Doris Diamond. These were white teachers I could remember. Miss Diamond, she was Jewish. And they taught straight from the book. Meaning that they did the whole subject matter. Whereas, the black teachers taught from the book, but they also inspired us to go on to college and better ourselves and what not. I'll never forget, Miss Diamond, she was an expert on Egypt. And I guess this is why I'm wearing glasses today because she used to write very small, and she could write hieroglyphics and cuneiform. Now you ask me, you know, those were the alphabets of the early Egyptians, hyroglyphics and koneoform. And we would have to write them back then in grammar school. And I learned all about Rah the sun god and the Sphinx and the pyramids and kofuu and what not and everything, but what I failed to learn and she failed to tell us was that the Egyptians were black people. I didn't learn that until later on.

But I had a grasp of Egypt back then.

Mr. Mayer, another white teacher I had, he was a math. He just drilled us in math. Math, math, math, math, math to the point that I hate math today. But then you had Mr. Rice, Miss Chambers, who later became Mrs. McClean. This is the lady that lived right next door to the school or across the street from the school on Stanford Place, the back of the school. They would give us a different level of academics, other than what they taught us. They would sit and talk with us about going on and making something of ourselves and what not. They were that, quote, unquote, educational extended family. They discussed things with us about, they talked about segregation and and what not and everything to us, and how they came up and what they had to endure in predominantly black colleges as well as in the south and what not.

Overall, I would say that I received a good education at Charlton Street School, a good elementary education and what not. I think the world really opened up to me is when I went to Weequake High School. And at that particular time, that was a very prestigious, predominantly Jewish high school. All the teachers were Jewish. Well, teachers there. For some reason they had a, every teacher at Weequake either went to Rutgers or New York University. And I don't know why that was the case, but very superior education. And this was where I was introduced to Socrates, Shakespeare, Macbeth, Willa Cather, Leonard Bernstein. I had this particular English teacher, she was a fanatic of Leonard Bernstein and what not. So she would go to a Leonard Bernstein concert and before the classroom she would say, well, gee whiz, how was everybody's weekend. And we would say, hey, we would do this and that and all. And she would say, well, I went to a concert with Leonard Bernstein. So I learned about Leonard Bernstein through the New York Times. We had to read the Times every day. The New York Times was sold at the school. And there was this lady, English teacher, history teacher, but she would give an exam or quizzes from the Times. So you had to read the New York Times that morning before you walked in her classroom because, and you had to read it from the front page to the last page. I mean, she would give quizzes in sports, she would give quizzes in politics and economics and what not. And that geared me towards reading the newspapers and what not. Which if I go without reading a newspaper for three or four days, I'm lost. You know, I'm like a junky needing a fix. Because I've just become addicted to reading newspapers. You know, all types of newspapers and what not.

But the education was superior. And on the other end of the pendulum, I still was receiving my African-American education from my mother at home reading the Afro-American newspapers, going to the library reading books.

I remember this gentleman lived next door to me was a Mason, and he would sit and talk to us about famous Masons and how the Masonic movement was tied into Egypt, and you know, how black Masons were discriminated against by the white Masons and what not and everything. And all of my uncles when I would visit them in the south during the summer, I would see the ruler and the G in the middle and everything, and I would ask questions and everything. And they would tell me, you know, a lot of questions are sacred that they couldn't share with me and everything. But I learned a lot about the Masonic movement, you know, from discussing with them also, which tied into Egypt. Because at that particular time, I think, you had secret societies in Egypt and what not and everything.

And it was just a fulfilling education. I really learned a lot. I was thrown into a classroom that I had to produce or not. At Weequake if you were failing and you were sixteen, they would put you out. They would send you to Central Evening School. And that was another onus over our heads. We all knew that as African-American students and what not. My mother would always tell me, you know, how embarrassing it would be if I were expelled and kicked out of Weequake High School and what not. If I got transferred to another school and this and that. I mean, it was just, she was just extremely proud as well as any other black parent whose son or daughter attended Weequake. That's not to berate the other schools or Southside High School or Westside or Central High School., Because I had a lot of friends that attended those schools, and we competed against one another in athletics and what not, spelling bees and debates and what not and all. But anyone growing up in the black community or the white community, will tell you in the early 50s that Weequake was one of the top notch high schools in the state.

Q: Given the fact that there were so few African-American students in say Weequake or say better schools at that time, were black students treated any differently than the white students?

Wilkerson: Well, we were, you know, the interesting thing about it is, we were in the same

classrooms with the Jewish students. Now, so we learned the same thing they learned. We were looked up, if you were an athlete, you were looked upon as a special person. You know. It wasn't like the myth that, you know, you could jump the highest or what not and everything. You know, as an athlete, I was perceived by many of the Jewish students, you know, as being a good athlete and what not, but also, an athlete with something under the cap. Because if I didn't have anything under the cap, I wouldn't be at the school. You had special advantages in that as an athlete at the school. Although it stressed academics also. You know, you had allies from your coaches and everything. I remember a couple of, two African-American athletes and I think there was one Jewish athlete, they were, you know, failing in their subjects and what not, or one of their subjects and what not, and they were outstanding athletes. And the teacher received pressure from one of the coaches and what not to, you know, see if these kids could take several make up tests and what not and everything. They were great and they were needed and what not, and they represented the school. And so this particular teacher, I can't remember his name, but, you know, he gave in and what not and everything.

It's just like, it happens today in colleges and universities throughout the country. You know, and you had to be extremely dumb and stupid to get thrown out of Weequake. I mean, they would, you know, you would always have the opportunity to go to summer school. There were guys who would get thrown out, and the administration, school's administration would say, okay, what we'll do. You go to Central Evening School for six months and then we'll re-admit you in September. And that happened. And there were some guys who chose not to return, and, you know, they got their degrees, they finished from Central High School, Central Evening School. Because that was the only evening, if I can recollect, I think that was the only night school for adults you had in the city then was Central. But the interesting thing about it is, after you finished all your requirements from Central, you could go back to Weequake. And I guess this was like, I guess this occurred in all of the high schools, but you could go back and march with your class, and you'd get a diploma from Weequake. Not Central Evening School. Although there were those who chose to remain at Central Evening School and finish Central Evening School, they got their diplomas. You know, but it was like among my gang and guys that I pal around with, and, you know, the females as well, you know, it was an embarrassment to graduate from Central

Evening School. You know what I mean? And the ironic thing about it is, after I graduated from Weequake, I needed another unit of science to get accepted to this particular college that I wanted to go to, Morgan State College in Baltimore. And where did I wind up getting that one unit?

Q: Central Evening High.

Wilkerson: That's right. Central Evening School. So, you know, it was really funny. And I didn't go to Morgan. I didn't go to Morgan. Being very honest with you, what happened I got down there, it was in August of 1961, and I had relatives living in Baltimore and what not and everything. And oh, I just wanted to go to Morgan. I mean, you know, I wanted to go to Morgan State, Morgan State, Morgan State. Because I would go down there during the summers, and spend some time with them. My aunt had a store near Coppin State Teachers College. And, you know, I wanted to go to Morgan. Do you know, I got down to Morgan and they gave me the ACE exam. Meanwhile, I had already been accepted to Bluefield State College and Lane College in Tennessee. I'd been accepted to North Carolina A&T and I had been accepted to Maryland State College in Salsbury. So I had, I had back up schools. To say that I went down to Morgan and flunked the ACE exam, and I was extremely hurt and crushed and what not and everything. But my rationalization was, well, hell, you know, maybe Morgan wasn't for me and maybe I wasn't for Morgan. Got home that weekend and next week got an acceptance letter from West Virginia State College. Didn't know anything about West Virginia State College. I had written there and my track coach had written to the coach there, blah, blah, blah, make a long story short. Put aside North Carolina A&T, Bluefield State College and everything. Narrowed it down to West Virginia State College. Went to West Virginia State College in September of 61. Mind you, I had just flunked the ACE exam to get into Morgan, and I had to take an ACE exam for West Virginia State College. And the interesting thing about it Mrs. Brickus, when I got the exam, I looked on the exam and I said to myself, this is the same exam that I had at Morgan. And you know what I passed it. And I had not interest in West Virginia State College. You know, I mean, I passed the exam. And, you know, that's a phenomenon I cannot explain. You're passing an exam in September of 91, I think maybe it was maybe September the twelfth or thirteenth or the fourteenth

of 91, and flunking the same exam three weeks prior.

Q: Well, I would think that that may have been an understandable phenomenon, Mr. Wilkerson, because first of all you'd had exposure to the exam, and secondly, you had gotten that psychological jolt for having failed it at Morgan. Now, you see, you were not. You probably were very sure of yourself when you went to Morgan. You were gonna pass and you were gonna enter Morgan which was where you wanted to go all that time. And it kind of hit you as a, over the head so to speak. And your thinking processes were different when you went to Virginia as opposed to when you went to Morgan. So that's kind of understandable.

Wilkerson: It was wild.

Q: Fate can kind of straighten us up.

Wilkerson: It was wild. It really was. You know, and I had written North Carolina A&T saying that I wouldn't be, you know, coming there. You know what I mean? And I had written off Bluefield. And, you know, it was a mind blower. How could I pass an exam? You know, then I got to wondering, since they wanted me down there to run track. You know, did I really pass the exam. Then I started thinking that. You know, did I really pass the exam. That was in my mind for about a week. Then I said to myself, well, hey, you know what, I'm here. Whether the track coach pulled some strings. I mean, you know, because the interesting thing about it was we, all the so-called potential athletes, we took this exam apart from the student, other freshmen coming in. And again, going back to high school, if that were the case as far as them with athletes, athletes were always put on a higher pedestal. That's right. So being very honest, with you today, I don't know whether I passed it or not. I don't know whether the coach pulled strings for me, talked to admissions or what not. You know what I mean? And I thought about that for about a week or two, but then, you know, I just got caught up in the college atmosphere being a freshman. I said, well, gee whiz, I'm here. So why worry.

Q: That was all that mattered. Getting back to Weequake though, what was the relationship between the black and white students there?

Wilkerson: Amiably. Blacks dated whites, whites dated blacks. There were no. We didn't encounter any racism from the Jewish students and what not and everything.

Q: Approximately how many blacks were in Weequake during your years there?

Wilkerson: During my years, I would say 57 to 61, I would say about two hundred, out of about maybe twenty-five or three thousand students.

Q: Oh, the ratio was still very small.

Wilkerson: Yes.

Q: Were black students involved in intramural sports or other extracurricular activities?

Wilkerson: Yes. Other than sports, well, sports, particularly basketball and football were, those were the sports that we dominated, as well as track. Interestingly, swimming all Jewish. And why, because they all went to Bradley Beach in the summer and they could swim. They were outstanding swimmers. Soccer, you had several Jewish players, but you also had a lot of Polish students attending the school also, and the Polish male students, they would gravitate toward soccer. I guess, you know, that was, I hate to say that was an ethnic thing. You had, I remember we had Gil Wilson on the soccer team, and he later became a pharmacist. Gil was a rarity. He was on the soccer team and what not. You had, you know, black men dominated the major sports. Basketball, football, baseball and track. The black females, they gravitated toward the choir. A lot of the black female students were in the choir, they were on the newspaper, the Calumet, that was the name of the newspaper, the Calumet. And interestingly, a lot of the, you had a large proportion of black female students who took the general diploma, received the general

diploma in secretarial studies and business and what not and other. They threw the guys into the college prep course and program because we were the athletes, and they were looking for us to go on to college and what not.

Q: During your whole educational experience in Newark from elementary through high school, do you recall how many black teachers you encountered or black teachers you might have had?

Wilkerson: Well, when I was in elementary school, I had Mrs. Chambers, Mrs. McClain, who I talked about earlier. She was the type of teacher, she would force you to study if you didn't. She would always say, you know, you can do this, you can do that. You don't want to be the bum out on the street and everything. And she would even invite a few of us to her house. I'll never forget when she moved to East Orange. Oh my God, gee whiz. We went up to her house one day. I think it could have been a Saturday, you know what I mean. And Bobo Taylor, Bobo is now a member of the police department, Bobo and several of us. But anyway, you know, it took us out of our environment. At that particular time, East Orange was, quote, unquote, mecca. I mean, very few black people lived in East Orange and what not and everything. She would sit down and talk to us about, you know, little things like, you know, what side of the table does the fork go on. How to set a table.

Q: Social graces.

Wilkerson: Yeah. Yeah. You know, she would always say, well, gee whiz, Tommie, she says, now when you sit at a table, you know, you have to make sure you put your napkin in and this and that. And she was the. And I remember up at her house, you know, like I said, we were into rock and roll and what not. And she turned on some classical music. You know, we all looked at one another. And she said, she gotta learn this music. You gotta listen to this music too. And we used to say, oh, this is some corny music. I don't know whether it was Wagner or. But, you know, she introduced classical music to us. She said, later on in life, she said, you're gonna appreciate this. You can't see it now. You know what I mean? And what not. She said, you can listen to your

rock and roll. She said, I love that and I love jazz, but she said, you're gonna have to be well-rounded young men and women later on in life. But I'll never forget that. We sat down and we were listening. And, oh, my God, Mrs. Brickus, there was some corny music. You know, but, hey, to this very day I like classical music also.

Q: What would you consider to be the five most important events or developments that have occurred in Newark during your residence here? For example, labor strikes, political elections, the riots, any major fires or natural disasters?

Wilkerson: Well, I don't know how I could put them in order. I don't know whether I would put them in order. But I would say that one of the most significant or one of five significant developments, one was the election of Mayor Kenneth Gibson here in the City of Newark. At that particular time, I was a newspaper reporter for the Newark News, and I covered the election. And it was such a euphoric situation because at long last African-Americans had gained some sort of a political presence in the city. And that had emanated from your black and Puerto Rican convention which involved former Mayor Gibson, people like Gus Henningberg, or Yumama Bharacha, Sharpe James, who is now the mayor. Sharpe was involved in that also. It was just a gathering of all the, you know, the leading. Bob Kerwin, can't leave Bob Kerwin out because he was involved in it also. Bob Kerwin at that particular time was head of CORE in the City of Newark. Congress of Racial Equality.

END SIDE ONE, TAPE FIVE; BEGIN SIDE TWO, TAPE FIVE

Q: Mr. Wilkerson, we were discussing what you might consider as having been five of the most important events or developments that have happened in Newark during your residence here. And we had talked about the teachers strike and the election of Mayor Kenneth Gibson as being two of the most important events that happened. What about the riots that did occur in 67?

Wilkerson: Yeah. That was extremely significant. Number one, I covered the riots with the Afro-

American newspaper, and I saw the blood in the streets and what not. And heads were cracked by the State Troopers and what not and everything. The city was under occupation. It was devastating to see, I think it was Sunday morning walking along Spruce Street and everything, Bob Queen and myself. Bob Queen at that particular time was the editor of the Afro-American newspaper. And we were walking along Spruce Street and here were the stores burned to the ground and what not, and people wandering around in bewilderment, and the National Guard was giving out, National Guardsmen were giving out food and containers of milk to people. And you could just see the expression on the people's face. They were just humiliated. The people lost as much as the merchants in the community because a lot of those merchants had fire insurance. But the people lost, what the people lost was the services and what not. You know what I mean? Food was scarce then and what not. The city was just in a devastated situation. You had white flight leaving the city. And I think one particular effect, significant factor that the riot had on the city, well two-fold. One, that it energized the community as far as, it energized the community as far as getting actively involved politically which eventually lead to the black and Puerto Rican convention and Mayor Gibson's election. And number two, it was devastating in that the whole economy of the city changed. You had your white flight, you had stores closing, not opening up again. It was just, how should I put it. I don't want to get emotional. But it was, it was just completely different. You know. There was, you know, I guess, I covered it, and it was just touching seeing the State Troopers and what not. You know, you had National Guardsmen there also. But you had State Troopers who just came in and started beating up on people, shooting people. The interesting thing about it is you had white merchants who were putting up soul brother signs and what not on the stores and what not and everything. And the irony of it is a lot of the rioters or looters when they say the signs of the white merchants in the windows that had soul brother on it, they didn't touch the stores. But then, here come the State Troopers, and they see the store with soul brother and they're shooting, you know, they'd shoot out the windows and what not. You know what I mean? So, one way the merchant was safe from the community, but then you had an occupying force of State Troopers, when they saw soul brother signs, they shot up the stores and what not. But it, you know, out of that riot and out of a lot of the riots that were taking place back then.

Because I remember, if you remember, I think Watts was the first riot that occurred.

Q: In Los Angeles.

Wilkerson: Yeah. But then, out of it came some good. True, twenty-seven lives were lost. White and black lives. Out of it came the Kerner Report, the Kerner Commission Report. And it was named after former Governor of Ohio, Otto Kerner. And Lyndon Johnson in his Great Society finally sat down and realized that there is something wrong with the cities and everything. And we have a black and white problem. We have a social economic problem. Affirmative action increased. Affirmative action programs and everything increased and everything. The riot was significant. It changed the city scape of Newark. We lost businesses. We lost homes. There was that white flight.

On the other end of the pendulum, you had the Federal Government stepping in. Small Business, the SBA, Small Business Administration gave African-Americans monies to open up their businesses. You had people like Gus Henninberg, who lobbied for more blacks in the trade industries and what not and all. It was just, it was very significant. You know, here you're watching riots, you're watching a riot in Watts, and you're saying to yourself, well, will Newark ever occur. Could this occur in Newark. And, no, no, we have everything. We have everything together. No, this couldn't occur in Newark. But it did. It occurred in other cities as well.

I'm emotional when I talk about the riots and what not.

Q: Well, then maybe we had better change. Just let me ask you this final question, in reference to the riots. As a newspaper reporter, what do you think might have precipitated the riot in the first place?

Wilkerson: Well, there were reports that, John Smith was a taxi cab driver. He had allegedly, he had gotten a ticket by a policeman and what not and some words were passed and what not and all. And then in any situation you have bystanders and onlookers and what not and all. And I think that what precipitated the riots, now, if you look at the sociological factors of it, I think that people

were just tired of being oppressed or depressed or what not of the living conditions and everything. It was a time when you first had the advent of black power. And black power meant economic power more so than militant power. The white America looked upon black power as being negative and evil. Whereas Stokeley Carmichael and others who were espousing black power, they were talking about black empowerment, not necessarily black power through militancy.

But another significant factor, and I like to move on in the City of Newark was the opening of City National Bank, which was the brain child of Charles Wiggam, the late Charles Wiggam who owned Wiggam Funeral Home. As a kid growing up, we had another bank called Bethune National Savings and Loan, but that didn't gel. There were reports that the bank went under and people were, you know, I remember the bank opened and there were customers in the bank. The bank was doing business within the black community and then all of a sudden it closed. But I was younger then and I didn't know why it closed or whatever. But getting back to City National Bank which is on Broad Street, it was significant because here for the first time you're talking about black power. Well now we're come to the forefront of dealing with black economic power. Here is a bank that you could go to and sit down and talk to someone that bore your skin pigmentation about a loan. Whether it was about two thousand, whether it was a loan for two thousand dollars or a loan for five thousand dollars. You were able to obtain a loan and what not. You felt comfortable in talking to someone. And Charlie Wiggam, I don't know how he ran his funeral home, but, you know, Charlie Wiggam was at that bank as much as he was at the funeral home. I don't know he did it, but every time you would go.

Q: He had relatives that carried the funeral business on. His brother was there. And his son and his daughter also.

Wilkerson: Okay. But, you know, you go into Charlie, and Charlie would sit down and talk to you and everything. And, hey, you may not have gotten the loan that you wanted and everything, but you walked away with a sense of pride, you walked away with tremendous self-esteem, you know, that here you could turn if your bills were late or something of this nature and you needed a loan or what not, you could go to City National Bank. And I think that was a significant. And, you

know, City National Bank was the first minority owned financial lending institution in the state. And it has now branched. They have a branch in Hackensack, I think, now also.

Q: Oh really. I didn't know that. In what major ways do you think Newark has changed from your youth to now and how do you view the changes that have occurred?

Wilkerson: Well, it's changed in one respect. I think that I look at the education system, and I'm just taking education as an example because I look at it for any group of people to advance, regardless of the color, you have to have a structured sound educational system for its young people and its youth and what not. And I must say that the educational system has deteriorated tremendously. Who can I point the finger at and what not. That's a good question. Can I blame Trenton? Or shall I blame Trenton or shall I blame the former black superintendent of schools. That's a toss up. All I know is that the system has deteriorated and what not. The values that we had as kids within our community, the respect to the elderly. Those values are all out the window. And, you know, you listen to a lot of parents today. The so-called nuclear family saying, well, gee whiz, there's only one adult in the family. Usually the working mother, the father isn't there. Well, you know, when we were growing up, a lot of us didn't have fathers. You know. But we made it. And we made it through the extended family. Today you don't have that extended family. You know, if a child is beaten for being rude or cruel and everything, the parent will come to his or her defense and ostracize an individual who is berating a child or who is beating a child. The city is, I think, at this point is just caught up in a whirlwind of uncertainty. I don't know where it's headed. I don't know whether our so-called leaders know where it's headed. Our so-called political leaders. It's a big difference. You could walk the streets of the city and all, you know what I mean, without fear of being attacked or what not and everything. You can't do that now. And I realize that, you know, that there have been some strides in efforts being made to, you know, bring back the city as a so-called Renaissance city and what not, but you have to look at your leadership, and you have to look at the citizenship. Not only in Newark, but throughout this country. A lot of citizens look upon politics with an apothetical view. You know, they're distrustful of politicians and elected officials and what not. Because the only time you see the elected officials are when they're

campaigning in particular neighborhoods and what not.

Like I mentioned earlier, Irving Turner stayed in the community. He lived in the community. And he was there whenever you needed him. He would be there and what not.

Q: Well, let me ask you this. How can we explain or justify the deterioration that you talked about in the quality of education in the City of Newark in public schools and the establishment and growth of institutions of higher learning? The colleges. Essex County College and New Jersey Institute of Technology, Rutgers University. I mean, how do we justify the quality of education in public schools as opposed to the emphasis on higher education in Newark? Well not so much the emphasis on higher education, but the growth of higher education in the City of Newark?

Wilkerson: Before the riots, NJIT existed. It was then known as the Newark College of Engineering. We had Rutgers here. You had, you didn't have Essex County College here. Essex County College, if I remember, Essex County College when I was a newspaperman their offices was adjacent to me at the Newark News.

Q: Down on Clinton Street.

Wilkerson: Yeah. Clinton Street. Right. That was their first building. That's an interesting question. I can say that as far as Essex County College is concerned, Essex County College was a god send because it gave a lot of people an opportunity, hard working African-American citizens an opportunity to see that there is such a thing as higher education and that they can partake in the education experiment and advance and better themselves on their jobs and in life and what not by going, attending Essex County College. It was masterfully planned I'm sure, but it worked out that Essex County College is in the City of Newark. For Rutgers, Seton Hall, what other colleges are there? New Jersey Institute of Technology.

Q: I think that's it.

Wilkerson: I'm sure that they are playing a significant role within the educational channels or sphere of the City of Newark. But I see Essex County College as playing a paramount role because that's where you have that transition from high school right to Essex County College. You have that transition from Central Evening School to Essex County College. And Essex County College not only is providing an academic stimulus for, you know, Newark citizens, but it's also getting actively involved in the community. They have a Y center there, and I think they may deal with women's issues. They have, you want to go there and they have job counseling, employment counseling sessions there also. Wynona Lipman teaches a course over there every Saturday morning, Senator Wynona Lipman, on economic development, economic empowerment. I don't know of any courses like that at NJIT or Rutgers or what not. It's a community college. And I say that Essex County College had made. I mean, if you close Essex County College tomorrow, I think the city would be in a devastating situation really. Possibly as devastating and I may be stretching a little, but it's possibly as devastating as 1967 was.

Q: Well, I got about three more questions that I want to get to before our tape runs out. And first, when do you feel black life in Newark reached its highest peak? What was so great about that time? And when do you feel black life in Newark reached its lowest point, and what was so bad about that particular time?

Wilkerson: Black life in the respect of upward mobility or economic empowerment?

Q: Yeah. That would be going toward the highest peak, and then where did we go from there, did we?

Wilkerson: I think that we reached that peak, again going back to the significance of the riots. We reached that peak when there are all sorts of reports and commissions out here, the Kerner Commission and affirmative action, and what not and everything. SBA loans were flying all over the place and what not and all, and blacks were opening up businesses and what not and everything. And then all of a sudden, homes were being built and everything. I mean, modular

homes. The society hill type townhouses and what not. And then all of a sudden, I think that I saw everything somewhat regress during the Reagan administration. And that was when, early 80s. All through the 80s, oh rough times during the 80s. The Reagan administration. I think that set things back during the Reagan administration. That to me was the lowest peak in the city. The city is now being revitalized and what not. You know, while there are efforts being made as far as the New Jersey Performing Arts Center is concerned. That's good also. But we still need more affordable housing for Newark residents and citizens.

Q: And more good paying jobs.

Wilkerson: We need more jobs. We need an economic base. We need countries, you know, why can't our elected officials and those in government, why can't they establish some type of a trade mission to various countries and bring back business in the city. Other cities have trade missions where they go off and they bring back industry into the city and everything. What about the educational system? Now the state has taken over the school system. Instead of, there are many people in the community that are fighting the state. Well, the state would not be here if we didn't have such ineffective leadership during the years that the head of the school board, you know, back in 75 or 80, 85 or 1990. The city has promise, but I think that, while building a baseball stadium in the Iron Bound section is also great, I think that there must be, what must occur is getting more citizens involved in political and economic empowerment. And choosing the right elected officials and what not and everything, and citizens partaking in dealing with matters regarding government and city. You know what I mean? If a citizen or a particular group is opposed to a certain bill that's passed by the city council or vetoed by the mayor, I think that they have every right to make their voices heard. Without citizen participation, you know, a city does not move forward.

Q: Did you know Louise Scott?

Wilkerson: Yes and no. I remember meeting her, but I didn't really know her on a first name

basis. I mean, I had met her. My mother went to Scott School of Beauty back in the mid-50s and what not and everything. And I remember being at my mother's graduation. I was a little kid then and I shook hands with Mrs. Scott and everything. And I remember meeting Mrs. Scott at several functions, you know, in the city and everything. But I did not really know her. But I look upon her as being, you're talking about economic empowerment, her the Coleman brothers and what not who owned the Coleman Hotel, as being dynamic catalysts, you know, who contributed enormously to the City of Newark.

Q: What do you think the community's general perception was of Mrs. Scott?

Wilkerson: She was admired, loved. She was a very compassionate person. She opened up her, I remember Bernice Basson used to broadcast from there. I know she gave a lot to various community organizations and what not. And she was marvelous.

Q: Did you ever go to her residence or to the institution when she was there?

Wilkerson: Yes. Yes. I used to sit in sometimes on Bernice's Basson's radio. I was never on her show, but I would be in the audience. Because Bernice Basson broadcasted from there. And I would drop by there when they were taping on Sundays and what not and all.

Q: Well, Mr. Wilkerson, how would you sum up your experience of living in Newark and if you had to live your life over would you live in Newark? Why or why not.

Wilkerson: Well, it's been a gratifying experience. I mean this is home. It's a fantastic city. It has tremendous promise and tremendous future. I think that what the city needs is new individuals, well I'll put it this way. Individuals with new visions. Realistic visions. Realistic visions for economic and political advancement. And again, I'm talking about the leadership. The political leadership. Throughout the course of history, there have been elected officials and politicians, again this is why you have such public apathy. You know, right now the people really are, you

know, it's a shame how you can come to a council meeting and what not. Monthly council meetings. You know, you see the same people there. You know, before the council, pleading with the council. Some are very argumentative, some are castigating the council unnecessarily. But you see the same people. And I'm sure that there are more and more people here in the city of Newark who want to partake within the political sphere of the city, but are somewhat frustrated. You know, their attitude, well, gee whiz, you know, I go down there and complain or tell them this and that, it's going to be overlooked. But you have to realize that the nine individuals that sit on the Newark Municipal Council, the nine distinguished individuals are put there by the people, as well as the mayor. And, you know, if the people are upset and want change, positive change. I hope it's positive change. You don't need any negative change. If those people are disgruntled and dissatisfied with the individuals that are our elected officials, then they have every right to remove them through the political process. But, you know, the political process can only be as effective if they partake in the political process. And when they come before the council and meet with the mayor, that they have some concrete serious idea instead of castigating a particular council member for this or that or for something he or she [tape runs out].

END OF INTERVIEW